

REFORMING SCHOOL FOOD: STRUCTURE, AGENCY  
AND THE MEANING OF CHANGE

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# REFORMING SCHOOL FOOD: STRUCTURE, AGENCY AND THE MEANING OF CHANGE

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This dissertation examines school food reform from the perspective of actors who are directly implicated and participate most in its processes: school food service directors, food service staff, and students. School food reform has become a popular issue in the United States, particularly since the 2004 Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act required every school district in the country to develop a School Wellness Policy for promoting student health and physical activity. These policies were symbolic of larger national concerns about childhood health and wellness and grounded in the belief that schools are a critical site for addressing adolescent health.

This research asks what school food reform means to actors closest to the center of change, how they interpret their role in this process, and what this means for reform prospects. In answering these questions, this study investigates how structural forces shaping school food from above and on-the-ground realities from below converge at the level of central actors who serve as shock absorbers of the contradictory forces in the process of school food reform.

The analytical chapters in this dissertation focus on actors at the center of making change happen in the school food environment and the conflicts they experience due to differences between expectations from above and below. In chapter

four, I examine the role conflict of food service directors as they reconcile the conflicts inherent in directing a program that is intended to improve childhood health and nutrition yet must be financially self-sustaining. In chapter five, I explore the role of food service staff, or “lunch ladies.” In particular I examine how the “emotional labor” and technical labor that staff perform interact to ultimately align their interests with students, who are resistant to change for the most part. In chapter six, I focus on students and how their role as “consumer in the marketplace” has come to supersede their role as “student in the school,” and how this is a result of the tendency in mainstream education to ignore the potential for school lunch to be an integral part of the school day.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Andrea Woodward was born and grew up in Little Falls, Minnesota. She attended Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota and received a B.A. with high honors in International Relations and Third World Studies in 1998. Upon graduation, Andrea pursued an M.A. in Educational Policy and Administration at the University of Minnesota, which she completed in June of 2001. Andrea then worked in Togo for two years with the United States Peace Corps as a community health and AIDS prevention extension agent. One year after returning from Togo she entered the graduate field of Development Sociology at Cornell University, where she received her Ph.D. in 2011. She currently lives in Berea, Kentucky, with her husband and daughter where she is an assistant professor of social science at Berea College

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Study Design and Theoretical Orientation .....	5
CHAPTER 2: The School Food Environment From “Above” and “Below” .....	9
Precursors to Federal Involvement.....	10
The Great Depression to World War I .....	13
Post-War Period.....	15
The 1960’s: Finding and Addressing Gaps in Coverage.....	17
Present School Lunch Program Administration .....	21
What it All <i>Means</i> : Micro-Level Studies of School Food Programs .....	26
Structure, Agency, and the Self in School Food Reform .....	33
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS .....	46
Research Design .....	46
Research Context and Site Selection.....	50
Research Questions and Data Collection .....	53
Data Analysis.....	62
Research Limitations .....	63
CHAPTER 4: FOOD SERVICE DIRECTORS & THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY ...	67
The Role of Directors in School Food Reform .....	68
Constraining and Enabling Structures .....	94
Conclusion.....	107
CHAPTER 5: CAFETERIA WORKER OR LUNCH LADY? .....	111
Technical Labor: Cook, Server, Cashier .....	113
Emotional Labor in the High School Cafeteria .....	118
Emotional Labor and Role Resistance .....	134
Discussion and Conclusion.....	139
CHAPTER 6: SCHOOL CULTURE AND STUDENT AGENCY .....	143
The Role of Students and Schools.....	145
Student Perceptions of Food in School .....	149
Student Responses to Food in School .....	154
Student Agency in School Food Reform: The Case of Longview .....	163
Discussion.....	167
CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION.....	174
Implications for Theory and Policy .....	178
Directions for Future Research.....	183
APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORMS .....	187
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDES.....	193
REFERENCES .....	196

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: USDA Processed Commodities .....	81
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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SWP	School Wellness Policy
FRPL	Free and Reduced-Price Lunch
NSLP	National School Lunch Program
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
SFA	School Food Authority
IOM	Institute of Medicine
SBP	School Breakfast Program
SNA	School Nutrition Association

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past ten years, the health and eating habits of children and youth in the United States have become a critical area of concern among health professionals, academics, policy makers, and the public (Brownell and Horgen 2004; Koplan, Liverman, and Kraak 2005; Ogden 2006). In particular, rising childhood obesity rates have drawn our attention to what youth are eating, where they are eating it, and how they are making food-related decisions. Higher weight and obesity levels of children have been attributed to a number of factors related to diet and activity, including access to and affordability of nutritious foods, advertising to children, car-centric city planning, unsafe neighborhoods, and technology's substitution for physical activity in day-to-day routines (Koplan, Liverman, and Kraak 2005; Nestle 2003; Sallis and Glanz 2006). As the public has increasingly drawn its attention to the issue of childhood obesity, schools have fallen under scrutiny for the role they play in promoting, or failing to promote, optimal health in children (French, Story, and Fulkerson 2002; Greves and Rivara 2006; Poppendieck 2010; Story, Kaphingst, and French 2006).

Whether or not this intense focus on schools is an appropriate response to concerns about childhood obesity, it is nevertheless predictable. After families, schools are perhaps the most significant agent of socialization in a child's life. The sheer amount of time children spend in school makes this institution a logical focal point any time an issue of critical importance to the well-being of youths arises, such

as drug use, teen pregnancy, and bullying. Among concerns such as these, however, unhealthy food consumption is unique in that it is essentially a school-sanctioned activity and, for many students, it is a routine part of the school day. Whereas schools rely on classroom-based instruction for educating students about at-risk behaviors, the most powerful education messages students receive about eating habits may be from the structure of the school food environment itself.

School food constitutes a large share of the overall school wellness environment and is largely a product of two components: the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and what are called “competitive” foods, because they are sold in competition with food provided through the NSLP. The NSLP was established by President Truman in 1946 and was initially intended to fill three needs in particular: adequate nourishment for America’s schoolchildren, their preparedness to defend the country, and a guaranteed market for American farmers. Therefore, at its inception, the NSLP was lauded for its potential to address three of the country’s most pressing issues at once (Sims, 1998; Lautenschlager, 2006). While policies pertaining to NSLP meals are determined at the federal level, states and local school districts have the authority to regulate the availability and nutritional quality of competitive foods, which are sold primarily through vending machines, a la carte vendors, school stores, and fund-raisers. The increase in the availability and variety of competitive foods over time has been facilitated by minimal federal nutritional regulation, culminating in a current arrangement that many commentators find concerning (Center for Science in the Public Interest 2006; Probart 2006; Story and Neumark-Sztainer 1999).

The situation today regarding food in schools parallels in many ways the national picture prior to the National School Lunch Program's start in the 1940s. At that time, however, it was a lack of food rather than its excess that was drawing attention to the health of the country's youth. During both World Wars, between 25 percent and 40 percent of Americans recruited for military service were rejected as unfit because they were underweight, undernourished, or suffered from other health problems that could have been prevented by proper nutrition during childhood (Laughtenschlager 2006). This fact helped to mobilize a critical mass of support for a program the public had been hesitant to embrace when it was framed merely as a welfare program. When viewed as a matter of national defense as well—and particularly in light of two World Wars—the NSLP's support quickly became much more widespread and the program became permanently funded at the federal level in 1946.

More than 60 years later, the National School Lunch Program, “America's favorite welfare program” (Levine 2008) and the schools in which it is carried out are finding themselves at the center of public concern about childhood health and, especially, nutrition. Recently the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 provided new momentum for improving access to healthful food options for schoolchildren through its mandate for each school district receiving NSLP funding to develop a local School Wellness Policy (SWP) by the start of the 2006-2007 school year. The policies were required to address goals for nutrition education, physical activity, and other school-based initiatives designed to promote student wellness. They were also to include guidelines for all foods available in schools and plans for

evaluating implementation of the policy. Finally, the policies were to be developed by teams composed of parents, teachers, administrators, school boards, school lunch staff, and community members. In addition to the SWP mandate, state and district-level regulations pertaining to food sold in schools are constantly changing around the country, making the present a potentially dynamic time for studying change.

Since the 2004 legislation, the momentum for school food reform has further increased, and it has done so at a rapid pace. Documentaries, books, and even a reality television series about the issue have become popular, celebrity chefs have been advocates on the topic, and First Lady Michelle Obama has brought perhaps more visibility than anyone to this issue with her “Let’s Move!” platform aimed at promoting wellness through healthy eating and exercise. The Child Nutrition and WIC legislation was also again reauthorized in 2010 and brought with it a new round of policies aimed at reforming food in schools hoped to be more powerful and effective than the last.

As with the larger nation-wide movement to curb obesity, popular discourses around school food reform often imply that individual, rather than structural, failings are to blame, and they place the onus for change on the individual (Kwan 2009). The most popular manifestation of this has been on the award-winning reality television series “Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution,” where the famous chef notoriously sought to transform the school food environment in a West Virginia School District (Hale 2010). The popularity of the television show indicated that it struck a chord with the American public. Oliver’s experiment characterized the community’s school food service director as resistant to change, its food service staff as untrained and ignorant,

and its students as unwilling to try new or healthier foods. Although the series eventually evolved past these characterizations and brought attention to, for example, the federal policies and corporate interests shaping school nutrition programs, its starting point reflected persistent and popular assumptions are about what (or who) is responsible for poor nutrition in schools: school food service directors, food service staff, and students themselves.

In this intense focus on these individuals as the problem, however, there is surprisingly little attention to what they have to say about school food reform. What does this reform mean for these actors? How are they interpreting the calls for change and their roles in the process? And what does this mean for the prospect of change? The main purpose of this dissertation is to investigate these questions and, ultimately, articulate how large-scale structural dynamics shaping the school food environment from above are interacting with, and in turn affected by, the micro-level processes—and actors interpretations of them—shaping the environment from below.

### ***Study Design and Theoretical Orientation***

With the above objective in mind, this study was based on an embedded, multiple-case design (Yin 2002). Four sites were selected for the study because of their location along a spectrum from traditional to alternative in terms of the food selection they offered to students. Lakeside was the most traditional of the four schools, while Longview was the most alternative.<sup>1</sup> Located between these two schools were Jeffersonville and Glendale, whose food service directors expressed

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<sup>1</sup> I use synonyms for school names and individuals throughout this dissertation.



dedication to feeding students nutritious meals but were still relatively traditional in their menu planning. Lakeside and Longview were located in the same urban school district, while Jeffersonville and Glendale were located in rural districts. The Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL) rates at these schools—a commonly used measure of poverty—were 40, 25, 19 and 22 percent.

Data collection for this project took place from March of 2008 to June of 2010 and consisted of ethnographic observations, informal interviews with food service staff, and in-depth interviews with food service directors, cafeteria managers and staff, principals, faculty, school board members, community residents, and parents, as well as a combination of in-depth and focus group interviews with food service staff and students. Content analysis was also performed on each school's food-related policies, food service menus, newspaper articles, newsletters, and other documents pertaining to food programs and the wider school community. This research was approved by the Cornell University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Participants and approval was renewed annually until data collection was completed.

The theoretical framework for this dissertation is grounded in structuration theory and symbolic interactionism and seeks to illuminate how individuals are actively involved in the process of creating meaning and defining social reality, including roles, in the context of school food reform. I use this framework to suggest that actors at the center of this reform and the conflicting role expectations they face from above and below serve as a bridge between the micro- and macro-level. They are not only a bridge, however; the individuals who take on these roles are also “shock absorbers” (Hochschild 1983) of the contradictory forces in the process of reform that

simultaneously enable and constrain actors to realize change.

### ***Layout of the Dissertation***

Chapter two provides a history of food in schools and an overview of the literature about how the process of institutionalizing the government's largest childhood nutrition program has played out over the past century and what the structural dynamics involved in this process have been. The chapter concludes with an articulation of my theoretical orientation, followed by a chapter about my research methods. This background provides the context necessary for understanding the "big picture" that actors on the ground are confronted with as they seek to realize (and respond to demands for) change at the local level.

Chapters Four through Six focus on the local actors at the center of making change happen in the school food environment and the conflicts they experience due to differences between expectations from above and below. In Chapter Four, I examine the role conflict of food service directors as they reconcile the conflicts inherent in directing a program that is intended to improve childhood health and nutrition, while at the same time function essentially as a business, albeit one with many more restrictions than a typical private enterprise would face. In Chapter Five, I explore the role of food service staff, or "lunch lady." In particular I examine how the "emotional labor" (Hochschild 1983) that staff perform interacts with the technical labor they perform to ultimately align their interests with students, who for the most-part are dissatisfied with the ways in which school lunch programs are framing and, ultimately, implementing "healthy" changes to food options in school. In Chapter Six,

I look at students and how their role as “consumer in the marketplace” has come to supersede their role as “student in the school,” and how this is a result of the tendency in mainstream education to ignore the potential for school lunch to be an integral part of the school day.

In Chapter Seven, I conclude by highlighting the tensions that exist for individuals as they navigate the road to school food reform and seek to understand their role in it. The conclusions of this study suggest that for school food reform to be meaningful in the future, it is necessary to understand what reform means to the people closest to the center of it and what is constraining and enabling them in their various roles. I argue that this understanding is essential for informing reform policies that reduce the “shock” absorbed by actors caught in translation between macro-level structures and micro-level, on-the-ground realities.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE SCHOOL FOOD ENVIRONMENT FROM “ABOVE” AND “BELOW”

The majority of the literature about the topic of food in school has focused on the large-scale structures shaping actors at the local level, particularly the federal government, special interest groups, and in more recent years, food corporations (Lautenschlager 2006; Levine 2008; Nestle 2003; Paquette 2005; Sims 1998). For the most part, this literature discusses the history of the National School Lunch Program, the political processes that have been key to its evolution, and public policy prescriptions for the future. However, little research has been done at the micro-level to examine how actors interpret these forces and their own actions within the resulting structures and how their daily interactions serve to maintain and, over time, modify the structure of food in schools. In this chapter I provide an overview of both bodies of literature, starting with that which focuses on the structure shaping food in schools and ending with a discussion of micro-level studies that get at the meaning of food in schools. The small body of work that has examined this meaning to the actors who are most closely connected to it has tended to focus on students, with little attention to food service directors or food service staff (see Sims, 1998, for an exception). Because surprising little has been written about food service directors and their staffs, the focus of this literature review is on research about students. It concludes with a discussion of my theoretical framework, which focuses on the roles and internal dynamics of central actors as “shock absorbers” (Hochschild 1983) at the intersection of the micro- and macro-levels in an ongoing process of structuration (Giddens 1984).

### ***1900 to World War I: Precursors to Federal Involvement***

The institution of school food as it is known in the United States began to emerge in the late nineteenth century as changes in labor patterns brought about changes in how people consumed food outside of the home. When the U.S. economy had been based on agriculture, the most significant meal of the day was a mid-day dinner, which was preceded in the morning by a large breakfast and followed in the evening by a light supper. As the country became industrialized, people working in offices and factories began eating lighter breakfasts, simpler noon meals (which they called “lunches”), and more substantial evening dinners (Mcintosh 1995).

Around the same time that lunch was becoming the new mid-day meal, schools were broadening their scope beyond education to encompass child welfare objectives, and they started to exert a kind of influence in childrens’ lives that had traditionally been reserved for families and communities (Lautenschlager 2006). The social and political aspirations of schools extended to lunchtime, with home economists, teachers, school administrators, government officials, and eventually business leaders hoping that food-related preferences and habits children picked up in school would carry over to their families and larger communities. As a home economics professor stated at the time, “Procuring a hot lunch at noon may appear as [the] initial aim, but ... it will be subordinated to that of reaching the parents through the children, helping them all to a better understanding of food values and good dietary habits, and making the school function as a civic and social center for the district” (Steckelberg 1923), p. 645).

Early twentieth-century efforts to provide food to children in school reflected a priority of reformers who advocated for alleviating some of the educational repercussions of poverty by improving child nutrition. (Hunter 1903) wrote in his book *Poverty*, “If it is a matter of principle in democratic America that every child shall be given a certain amount of instruction, let us render it possible for them to receive it ... by making full and adequate provision for the physical needs of the children who come from the homes of poverty” (p. 217). Likewise, (Spargo 1906) argued that publicly provided education must be accompanied by a publicly supported feeding program to equip all children with the “necessary physical basis for that education” (p. 117).

Early efforts to provide lunch in schools followed the lead of what was already taking place in England and Europe, where mass feeding programs were organized for poor children and adults by charitable organizations and, eventually, governments. School feeding began in Europe in 1790, when a municipal soup kitchen for unemployed laborers in Munich invited undernourished schoolchildren to partake in its meals (Bard 1968). In 1850s, the French Ministry of Public Education made school lunches mandatory as part of the compulsory education law. In 1906, England’s parliament passed the Provision of Meals Act, which transferred school-lunch programs from private charities to educational authorities.<sup>2</sup> Within the remaining years prior to World War I, school lunch programs were becoming highly developed in Italy, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden (Bard, 1968).

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<sup>2</sup> As early as 1883, the British medical journal *The Lancet* advocated for school lunches, saying “It is cruel to educate a growing child unless you are prepared to feed him” (August 14, 1883, cited in Bard, 1968).

Most early American public feeding programs lagged behind their European counterparts and were not specifically focused on schools; rather, they were found primarily in large cities where there was an incentive to avoid unrest among overcrowded, poor, and largely immigrant workers (Bard 1968). When reformers finally succeeded in providing meals to schoolchildren, they faced formidable challenges both logistically as well as politically. Organizers and the general public expressed concern around how to provide food to students without perpetuating perceived dependency on “handouts.” One response to this concern was the creation of the penny lunch movement in cities such as New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Cincinnati, whereby the school system provided basic ingredients, local supporters lent money (which was later repaid from the program’s profits), and students paid one cent for a hot meal or various components of it (Bechmann 1933; Torrey 1911).

Despite early attempts to provide nourishment to children and education to parents through school meals, the onset of World War I made clear how much progress schools, communities and the government had yet to make. Just over one-fourth of the first men called for the selective service were rejected as “unfit to bear arms” because they were underweight, undernourished, or manifested other deficiencies that were preventable in childhood. Reformers believed that if parents had been properly educated about nutrition, many of the draftees’ medical problems could have been prevented (Lautenschlager 2006).

Lydia Roberts, a prominent University of Chicago Home Economist, believed that schools were uniquely qualified to change the food habits of children through nutrition education and the provision of school lunches. She also believed that the

best remedy for malnutrition was to reach parents through their children and she advocated for cooperation among parents, school personnel, and healthcare professionals (Roberts 1927). Roberts, along with colleagues who continued in her footsteps, carved out a new place for professionals in the rearing and feeding of children. Both Roberts (1927) and (Martin 1954) maintained that the expertise and experience of professionals made them superior to most parents in improving child nutrition. Martin suggested that school meals were one of the most important aspects of a child's daily food intake, because they did not vary in nutritional composition as much as meals from home or other sources might.

By the beginning of the 1920s a non-governmental movement for serving lunches in school became well established and organized. The management, content, and cost of lunches varied from location to location and oversight usually fell to Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), home economics teachers, students, local charities, or mothers in the community. Government Extension Services in each state also assisted schools with meal planning and instruction (Gunderson 1971). A popular approach in some schools was to have children who could not afford to pay for lunch either contribute ingredients from their farms or gardens or help prepare and serve lunch (Leamy 1940; Steckelberg 1923; Stover 1933).

### ***The Great Depression and World War II: Impetuses and Obstacles to Change***

The momentum of early school feeding programs was eclipsed by the depression of the 1930s, which dealt a double blow to school food initiatives. First, it increased the number of children in the United States who were impoverished and in



need of a nutritious lunch at school. Second, it reduced the amount of financial and material support available from individuals and private organizations. It became clear that government assistance was necessary if school lunch programs were to remain viable through economic and political fluctuations, and the responsibility for school lunch gradually fell to municipalities, states, and eventually, the federal government (Gunderson, 1971).

Along with a greater need for feeding programs in schools, the depression also brought about a need for agricultural markets for farmers facing surplus production and low prices. In response to this situation, the federal government took its first step toward supporting a nationwide school lunch program by providing surplus agricultural commodities to schools at no cost. In 1936, Congress passed Public Law 320, which allocated money to the Secretary of Agriculture to purchase surplus agricultural commodities and dispose of them through donations to state welfare agencies and school lunch programs. This commodities program became part of the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation, which had been established three years prior to provide surplus pork, dairy products, and wheat to the poor.

At the same time that schools began receiving surplus commodities, the federal government also started providing labor to prepare and serve food to students through the Work Projects Administration (WPA) and the National Youth Administration (NYA). The free labor allowed school districts to maintain a low price for lunch, which in turn facilitated higher rates of participation (USDA Surplus Marketing Administration, 1941). By the end of the 1930s more 14,000 schools were serving approximately 900,000 children every day through the assistance of the commodity

program, the WPA, and the NYA. Political support for expanding school lunches came from the U.S. Surgeon General at the time, Dr. Thomas Parran, who was widely quoted as saying, “We are wasting money trying to educate children with half-starved bodies” (cited in Bard, 1968, p. 15).

Participation in school lunches continued to rise until 1942, when the onset of U.S. involvement in World War II severely diminished domestic food supplies (Gunderson, 1971). Surplus food donations dropped by 80 percent and WPA labor was completely eliminated from schools. Over the course of the war, Congress authorized appropriations to support school lunches on a year-to-year basis, but the unpredictable nature of funding made schools hesitant to make costly investments, such as those in kitchen construction and equipment, that were necessary to successful feeding programs.

### ***The Post-War Period: Permanent School Lunch Legislation***

In 1946, Congress passed the National School Lunch Act, which gave the school lunch program and its funding permanent status. Under the act’s provisions, assistance to states would be calculated based on 1) the number school children between the ages of 5 and 17, and 2) the state’s per capita income relative to the rest of the country. States had to match federal funds, which they could do through the sale of lunches, payments from the school board, and in-kind contributions in the form of food, equipment, labor, and other donations. Finally, schools were required to agree with their state educational agency to:

- 1) Serve lunches meeting the minimal nutritional requirements prescribed by the Secretary of Agriculture.
- 2) Serve meals at no or reduced cost to children unable to pay, and not to segregate or discriminate against such children.
- 3) Operate the lunch program on a non-profit basis.
- 4) Utilize USDA-provided surplus commodities to the greatest extent possible.
- 5) Maintain financial records and submit reports on a regular basis.

The lunches themselves fell under three categories: Type A, B, and C. Type A lunches were intended to meet one-third to one-half of a student's minimum daily nutritional requirement and they consisted of a half pint of milk, one source of protein,  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup of fruits or vegetables, one portion of starch, and two teaspoons butter or margarine. Type B lunches were intended to provide a supplementary lunch in schools that could not accommodate the preparation of Type A lunches. They were comprised of the same basic components of Type A lunches, but in smaller quantities. Type C lunches consisted only of a half pint of whole milk. Schools were reimbursed by the government monthly at a rate of nine cents per Type A lunch, six cents per Type B lunch, and 2 cents per Type C lunch.

The process of expanding and nationalizing school lunches resulted in a greater need for the promotion, supervision, and development of new and existing programs. Home economists were considered the logical choice for leadership positions, and the fact that they could be paid less made them more desirable candidates. It seemed that "the feminized nature of the teaching profession was mirrored in the feminized nature

of employment in school foodservice industry” (Lautenschlager, 2006, p. 69). Some women saw foodservice employment as a culturally acceptable way to increase their involvement in the public and political sphere (Shapiro 1986).

### ***1960s: Finding and Addressing Gaps in NSLP Coverage***

The 1946 NSLP legislation did not permanently solve some of the most critical issues schools faced around the country in providing lunches to children every day. Opposition to school lunches still existed by school administrators and community members who felt it was the responsibility of parents to provide lunches for their children. Particularly in rural areas, where people were accustomed to having schoolchildren go home for lunch, critics felt that lunch programs placed an unnecessary burden on schools. Logistical problems were perhaps the greatest barrier, however. Lack of money, particularly in districts where free and reduced-price lunches were needed the most, hindered the ability of many schools to provide food for all students. Additionally, lack of equipment and cooking facilities in schools continued to prove a major setback. Some schools simply could not afford the necessary renovations and cooking facilities; others were hesitant to make the sizable investment in older buildings that were likely to be replaced by newer ones (Bard, 1968).

The 1960s was a decade marked by both rising participation in the NSLP and research showing large gaps in service to populations around the country that needed it most. In 1962, the USDA undertook its most comprehensive survey of the program to date, sampling 5,000 of the country’s 97,000 public schools. From the data, the

USDA estimated that 30,000 schools offered no food service and had no cafeteria. Additionally, many of the schools that offered some kind of food service were only partially meeting the needs of their students (Bard, 1968). The number of school cafeterias being built around the country was on the rise, but this construction bypassed the poorest schools and those whose children needed lunches the most. One of the biggest obstacles for schools was the pressure for programs to be financially self-sustaining, which was particularly difficult in under-financed districts. Also problematic, however, were stigmas attached to federal aid, beliefs that children should still go home for lunch when possible, and inadequacies in the NSLP itself (Bard, 1968).

Six year later, a group of non-profit organizations formed a Committee on School Lunch Participation to investigate how well the NSLP was meeting the needs of low-income children (Robin 1968). At this time, just under 19 millions students were participating in the NSLP nationwide. The study found that two-thirds of all children were not participating in the school lunch program, only four percent were able to receive free or reduced-price lunch, and a major reason for such low participation was inconsistent guidelines about which children could receive free or reduced-price lunches (Robin 1968). Local school districts had the final say about which children would qualify for assistance, and it was generally the poorest districts that were least able to provide the amount of support needed by its schoolchildren. Additional reasons for low participation included a lack of kitchen facilities in schools for lunch preparation and a low priority some school authorities placed on providing lunch. Many administrators still felt that it was the responsibility of parents rather

than schools to provide food for children. The most predominant reason the committee found for low participation, however, was inadequate funding at the federal level. Within a few years after the Committee on School Lunch Participation's report came out, President Lyndon Johnson and Congress took further action to expand NSLP participation, framing the issue around ending hunger and malnutrition in the United States. While couching school lunch this way made support easier to garner, the programs were also bolstered by academic studies and anecdotal information from teachers that drew links between school lunch participation, academic achievement and classroom behavior.

As schools began serving lunches to larger numbers of students than ever before, districts faced the logistical problem of finding space for preparing and serving lunches in each school to hundreds of children every day. Some districts solved this problem by utilizing centralized kitchens, where all lunches would be prepared for the entire district and then transported to satellite schools at lunchtime. Proponents of centralized kitchens argued that they resulted in substantial labor and equipment savings. Critics of the system pointed to the additional cost of transportation, specialized delivery equipment, and expensive kitchen equipment that made it possible to cook meals for thousands of students in one location. Furthermore, menus became limited to what could easily be transported and the quality of meals was compromised in transit. Centralized kitchens proved to be a viable solution in some districts (particularly where student populations were high, where distances between schools were small, and where schools could not afford to add kitchens to existing older buildings) and less than ideal in others (Bard, 1968). A system of centralized kitchens

preparing all meals for an entire district of satellite schools still exists in many school districts today.

Another solution to preparing hundreds or thousands of school lunches that arose in the 1960s was the use of frozen foods. The primary advantages of frozen foods were that they allowed for a more diversified and appealing menu and they required far less kitchen space to turn out larger amounts of food. A third strategy schools employed was the installment of vending machines that served hot meals—some even entire Type-A lunch trays—at the push of a button. This option was attractive to districts that felt it was not their responsibility to feed students and wanted to focus their resources on strictly educational investments. Such districts would enter into agreements with vending companies to have the companies take over responsibility (distribution, staffing, equipment, disposal, etc.) for food sold during lunch. This option was most feasible in wealthier districts where students could afford to pay full price for their lunches. Because the machines were operating by private, for-profit companies, schools that used them did not qualify for NSLP funding or subsidies to low-income families (Bard, 1968).

A similar solution to the vending machines was to have an outside food-service company take over all food-related responsibilities at lunch time—as with frozen foods, this is a method still found in schools today. The USDA and the Nixon administration supported the idea of private companies being contracted to manage food programs in under-resourced and hard to serve areas (Poppendieck 2010). The American School Food Service Association (now the School Nutrition Association), comprised of food service workers and managers, was opposed to this

recommendation, but anti-hunger advocates saw it as a solution to a lack of infrastructure in some school districts. The contracting out of food service programs was slow to catch on, but 13 percent of school districts were doing this by 2005 (Gordon, Crepinsek, Nogales, and Condon 2007; Poppendieck 2010).

### ***Present School Lunch Program Administration***

Since the original 1946 legislation, Congress has passed various amendments to the NSLP that have, among other things, added a breakfast component to school food service, expanded the eligibility for NSLP participation beyond schools, and changed how need in schools is calculated. Today the NSLP is administered at the federal level by the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, at the state level by state departments of education (although in some cases by the state department of agriculture), and usually at the local level by the school district administration. According to federal regulations, school districts or individual schools must designate a School Food Authority (SFA) to operate the NSLP and take on responsibilities that include planning menus, purchasing food, overseeing meal preparation and service, maintaining reimbursement records, setting the price of full-priced meals, certifying student eligibility for subsidies and, with the school principal, scheduling mealtimes.

Food service programs in schools are typically administered at the district- rather than school level. At the local level, school boards set food service policy for school staff. Districts enter into annual agreements with their state department of education or agriculture to participate in the federally reimbursable meal programs, which state that the districts will follow established procedures for reporting on meals



served and claiming reimbursements. Schools must comply with regulations to serve healthful and nutritious lunches, but they have considerable flexibility in meeting these requirements.

The state Department of Education is responsible for training, technical assistance, and program monitoring. It is usually also the agency responsible for developing state regulations in accordance with federal laws and state legislation relevant to program operation and compliance. This or other state agencies consolidate reimbursement requests from around the state and submit them to the USDA. The reimbursements are arranged on a per-meal basis and based on federal subsidy legislation. Federal law requires that students whose families have incomes below certain levels receive free or reduced price lunch. In 2011, a family of four earning less than \$28,665 per year qualified for free lunch and a family earning less than \$40,792 per year qualified for reduced-price lunch. Federal legislation also sets the maximum price allowed for reduced price meals. In 2011, the maximum was 40 cents for lunch and 30 for breakfast (School Nutrition Association 2011). Additionally, schools with high rates of low-income students receive slightly higher reimbursement rates.

Although some states and school districts cover part of the meal program's costs from non-food revenues, SFAs are still expected to cover their costs from food revenues. Many SFAs find this expectation difficult to fulfill while adhering to federal guidelines. In some cases, SFAs use competitive food and beverage sales, which are subject to fewer regulations, to meet the financial expectations of their districts. Competitive foods include "all foods and beverages that are sold, served, or

given to students in the school environment other than meals served through the NSLP, SBP, and After-School Snack and meal Programs” (Institute of Medicine 2007). These foods are usually available to students through a la carte options, school stores, vending machines, school fund-raisers, and classroom rewards, parties or snacks.

The concern about the contemporary food environment extends beyond the cafeteria to other sites of food consumption within school as well. One of the greatest areas of concerns in this respect is corporate influence and marketing in schools (Brownell and Horgen 2004; Nestle 2003). This concern is centered around the influence that corporations have not only in shaping the food environment, but also the power they have to advertise to a captive audience of students. Food companies often gain entrée into schools because it is assumed that lunch programs and other financially-strained programs in the school can raise necessary funds by operating vending machines or selling a company’s goods in another way. For example, schools regularly employ a variety of different fundraising techniques to raise money, and among these one of the most popular is candy sales. Additionally, gift certificates to or other prizes from fast food restaurants are often given to students for reading competitions, perfect attendance, or behaving well in school. In more traditional forms of advertising, companies pay to have their logos displayed prominently around the school or at sporting events, and some even advertise on school busses. The point that critics of these tactics make is that although young people cannot escape the deluge of marketing aimed toward them in their daily lives, they should be able to learn in an environment that does not subject them to it any further. They argue that

treating youth as consumers in schools has compromised their role as students, and it compromises the ability of schools to effectively reinforce the wellness goals they have for students (Brownell and Horgen 2004).

While much of what is written and critiqued about the National School Lunch Program echoes many of the same messages and arguments about inadequate funding, conflicts of interest, the need for healthier options for students and the removal of corporate advertising in schools, some recent work goes a step further to advocate for going beyond standard nutrient-based conceptualizations of what is healthy to emphasize organic and local food being served in schools. Cooper and Holmes (2006) have been two of the most vocal advocates for healthier and more local foods being integrated into school meals and curriculum, and Cooper's work with the Berkeley Unified School District has been frequently highlighted as a model of what this approach might look like. Farm-to-school and school gardens are growing across the country as well. According to the National Farm to School Network, at the beginning of 2011 there were an estimated 2,257 Farm to School Programs in the United States operating in nearly 10,000 schools in all but four states (National Farm to School Network 2011). These programs can look substantially different from one school to the next: some include composting programs, school gardens, and farm tours, while others are primarily limited to sourcing a single and locally abundant produce item, such as apples. This latter form of "farm to school" is what some critics of the programs find concerning: food service directors and school districts can latch on the terminology of the movement to improve their image, while in reality only procuring

something that is abundant, easy and inexpensive to the exclusion of other kinds of produce (Poppendeick 2010).

Levine (2008) and Poppendeick (2010) also point out that many of these programs exist at private schools and are beyond the economic means of most public schools, and certainly those schools that serve a high percentage of FRPL students. Allen and Guthman (2006) have also argued out that farm to school programs are most popular and successful in affluent communities and are likely to be supported by private foundation grants. Thus, as Poppendeick (2010) notes, “They may actually increase rather than decrease the disparities between affluent and impoverished school systems” (p. 243).

At the same time, there are a number of hurdles that food service directors face when procuring local foods. First, they must work with a distributor who purchases locally because, with little exception, it is easier to purchase through this pre-existing channel rather than buying directly from the farmer. Second, to save time, labor and equipment, directors prefer to purchase items such as pre-packaged (cut and washed) lettuce, broccoli florets, and other forms of produce that, while still bring fresh have still gone through minimal processing to make their preparation simpler in the cafeteria kitchen. When staff must wash, cut, and peel produce before preparing it there is a substantial addition of labor hours required to do the work.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This is not an insignificant detail. A school food organization in one of the communities where I did this research received a grant to pilot a Fresh Fruits and Vegetables Program based on a USDA program by the same name, but the group did not adequately account for how many labor hours would be required for all of the preparation. They ended up needing to raise thousands of dollars to pay for the labor costs they had underestimated, and they had to recruit volunteers in addition to supplement their paid staff.

Some of the other barriers to farm to school include the need for schools to have a reliable schedule for inventory, which smaller farm operations cannot always guarantee. Related to this, food service directors generally need to know which produce they will have access to with enough advance notice to print menus that are distributed to families at the start of each new month. When procuring from local sources, fluctuations in quantities of food and timing of delivery fluctuate in ways that are often incompatible with the needs of school food service programs.

Until recently, USDA and state-level requirements for food procurement had made it particularly difficult for lunch programs to source foods locally. For example, New York state law previously required food service directors to purchase based solely on price and from the lowest bidder, unless there was a problem with quality. In 2009, initiatives such as the USDA's "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food" program and the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable program it piloted in a limited number of schools signaled a change. This was given further impetus from the 2008 Farm Bill's "geographic preference option" that helps schools procure unprocessed foods from local farmers.

### ***What it all means: Micro-level studies of food in schools***

As the above history of food in schools indicates, research about this topic has tended to focus on structural components of the National School Lunch Program and the wider school food environment of which it is a part. In particular, this existing literature has focused on weaknesses in the program stemming from the conflict of interest in the NSLP's multiple obligations, in particular the conflicts between the

program's dual purposes as a guaranteed market for U.S. farmers and as a nutrition program designed to curb hunger. With the exception of Poppendeick (2010), this literature has not articulated a clear picture of the specific ways in which macro-level policies pose problems for actors "on the ground." In this section, I review literature that takes a close look at what has been unfolding at the local level, focusing in particular on how this body of research has documented and analyzed what food in schools—and the processes by which it is made available to students—*means* to the people who consume it or are exposed to it every day. By reviewing these macro- and micro-level studies together, it becomes clear that there is a need to connect these two literatures by asking how structural forces are being interpreted by and among actors as they seek to make sense of and reform the food environments in their schools.

Little scholarly attention has touched on the uses and meanings of food in institutional contexts such as schools (Golden 2005; Mennel 1992; Morrison 1995b). Until recently, the attention this topic did receive came primarily from older qualitative case studies of British primary and secondary schools (Mauthner 1993; Morrison 1995a; Morrison 1996a; Morrison 1996b; Turner, Mayall, and Mauthner 1995), and only recently have scholars in the United States begun to focus on this topic at a structural level (Nestle 2002, Brownell 2004, Levine 2008, Poppendeick 2010). Studies from Britain have examined food in schools at the micro-level by focusing on the meaning that food has for students, while work in the United States takes a broader view to explore the structure of the food environment from a political-historical perspective. In addition to these two bodies of literature, research is emerging around farm-to-school and other innovative movements (Allen and Guthman

2006; Bagdonis, Hinrichs, and Schafft 2009; Kloppenburg 2006). In what follows, I provide a review of this literature before presenting a framework for understanding how these micro- and macro-level perspectives can be bridged through symbolic interactionism and structuration theory (Giddens 1984).

In terms of the meaning that students attach to food in schools, Morrison (1996a) brought attention to the “hidden curriculum for food” in primary schools in England and Japan, by exploring how students are exposed to messages about food and nutrition in classes such as health, home economics, and biology. In so doing, Morrison (1996a) highlights the hidden curriculum in English schools, which reinforces a political ideology of individualism. This ideology encourages individual responsibility and informed decision-making about food choices in classroom lessons, while de-emphasizing the “social, educational, and economic contexts in which eating is operationalized”—including the school food context itself (Morrison, 1996a: 101). Such an omission portrays healthy eating as a solely personal responsibility and “demoralizes” those who have the least amount of control over what they eat (Morrison, 1996a: 101).

In the same study, Morrison’s (1996a) larger focus is on the hidden curriculum of food outside of the classroom, where she suggests that, as elsewhere, “eating is ... linked to issues of social access, control, divisions, and power. In this sense, schools are micro-political areas in which government policies and cultural practices are filtered, negotiated, and mediated as school practice” (p. 90). In the Japanese education system, the government recognizes that food is not only a biological necessity but also an important means for self- and cultural expression. As such, the

Ministry of Education has officially stated that it considers its school lunch program to be part of the educational activities of schools (Morrison, 1996a, p. 94). Social concerns about food in Japanese schools focus on increases in students eating alone and in the popularity of Western foods and eating styles. The Ministry of Education has been actively involved in responding to these concerns, in part by reinforcing the importance of teacher-student relationships through shared meals (which takes place as part of the educational experience in the classroom), and helping to enable parents to make healthy food decisions for their children. In contrast, the British government has fragmented the social and educational dimensions of school eating (Morrison, 1996a). Primary school teachers do not eat lunch with their students, food-related activities are set strictly apart from educational activities in the classroom, and the individual choices of students and their parents dictate what children eat.

Research about food in schools in the United States has primarily come from the field of nutrition. In this literature, a number of studies have analyzed adolescent food consumption habits (Ludvigsen and Scott 2009; Neumark-Sztainer, French, Hannan, Story, and Fulkerson 2005; Shepherd, Harden, Rees, Brunton, Garcia, Oliver, and Oakley 2005; Young and Fors 2001) and student opinions about school food in particular (Gordon, Crepinsek, Nogales, and Condon 2007; Marples and Spillman 1995; Meyer 2000a; Meyer 2000b). Evidence from this research suggests a clear relationship between dietary habits, gender and socioeconomic status, with a disproportionately high percentage of disadvantaged children consuming less healthy diets. This research also has shown that although high school students demonstrate a propensity to consume foods high in fat, sodium, and sugar, their dissatisfaction with



school food service programs tends to be based on the taste, variety, and quality of foods sold in school. One of the most pervasive themes coming out of these analyses is that young people likely know which foods are good and bad for them, but this knowledge is not enough to change their behavior because it does not remove the psychological and physical barriers between youth and healthier diets.

Although most of the past and current literature about school food or school food reform focuses on either the macro- or micro-level exclusively, an exception is Janet Poppendeick's (2010) book *Free for All: Fixing School Lunch in American*, which details how structural forces in school nutrition are playing out on the ground throughout the United States and what these mean for actors as they respond to the call for school food reform. Poppendeick (2010) identifies tensions in the NSLP that present significant barriers to change. One aspect she emphasizes in particular is how (in)effectively it serves the populations of poor students for which it was initially intended. The program was created to feed students who might not otherwise be able to afford a mid-day meal, and who would therefore lose much of the benefit of a free public education due to the consequences of learning while hungry. Although the NSLP was created for such students, it now seeks to serve everyone, regardless of financial means, by offering meals at three price levels: free, reduced-price, and "full-price" (though the latter is still subsidized by the government). Poppendeick (2010) argues that this tiered system results in a stigma being attached to free and reduced lunch, whereby families who might qualify do not apply for the benefit, and even students whose parents have enrolled in the program might not take advantage of it

because doing so would single them out among their peers as poor.<sup>4</sup> Even though lunch programs have evolved to create anonymity for students receiving the benefit (e.g. students no longer use different tickets in lunch lines or a separate line altogether—although exceptions to this are documented in the news on a fairly regularly basis), because some students eat lunch for free or at a reduced price stigmatizes lunch and, especially breakfast, as “welfare food” and creates a desire for many students to distance themselves from it. Therefore, Poppendeick (2010) argues that a universal free lunch program would eliminate the stigma that many students attach to the program. Additionally, if the program were adequately supported it would allow for the removal of a la carte options, which in many cases serve as status symbols dividing wealthy students from the poor. With cafeterias serving free and healthy food, exclusively from the federal program, they could increase a sense of community by serving as a gathering place where all students, regardless of income, eat together during the school day.

A second tension that Poppendeick (2010) identifies in the wider school food environment is between the view of “children-as-customers” versus “children-as-students.” In the current model of school food provision, catering to student demand (perceived to be for foods high in fat, calories, and sodium) is the main priority and food programs, as well as the wider school environment itself, are hesitant to exert their authority in the cafeteria in ways that they do elsewhere in the school. Lunch is detached from the broader curriculum, so students consume goods in the cafeteria as customers in a marketplace rather than as learners in school. This model of school

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<sup>4</sup> See Rank and Hirschl (1993) for a discussion of this issue as it relates to food stamp use.

lunch as a business and students as customers has opened the door for food companies to advertise to students, promote their goods in public schools, and transform cafeterias into replicas of the fast-food restaurants that students frequent outside of school.

Related the last point, and as I expound upon in chapter six, a third tension occurs when school lunch is seen as an interruption to the school day or a break from it, rather than a curricular opportunity, it devalues the importance of what happens in the cafeteria socially, culturally, and developmentally (Poppendeick 2010). As Morrison (1996a) noted in her work on the hidden curriculum of school lunch, the experience of eating in schools socializes students to societal norms and expectations whether schools recognize it or not. When schools allow students to forego their lunch hours so they can take more courses, as many students around the country do (either to get ahead or because they are falling behind), it removes an important part of the social experience of school and the opportunity the lunch period has for students to learn from the “hidden curriculum” that is unique to the experience of connecting with others around a meal.

Last, but certainly not least, is a fourth conflict for food in schools around the kind of financial support lunch programs would require to make the kinds of changes for which many communities around the country are advocating. As Poppendeick (2010: 283) notes, “our current level of investment is actually fairly meager.” I expound on the details of this in chapter four, but to summarize briefly here, after labor, overhead and other costs, food service directors have just over one dollar (and sometimes less) to spend on each meal served in a school cafeteria. With such limited

resources, creating healthy meals that students will find appealing is a particularly difficult challenge. Some schools are able to meet this challenge, though this is usually because of exceptional circumstances (such as additional sources of funding, volunteer or otherwise lower-cost labor, particularly exceptional staff, or higher participation rates, which reduces the average cost-per-meal).

Poppendeick (2010) states that her work was intended to provide a clearer picture of the realities of school food and the National Lunch Program for those who wish to change it. Indeed, the system is far more complex than many advocates for change realize. In the remainder of this chapter, I outline a framework for understanding this process and what it means to the actors who are most closely associated with it; in particular, how actors interpret their role in this process, how these roles can be seen as a link between large-scale structures and on-the-ground interactions, and how these interactions are shaped by and in turn shape the larger social structure.

### ***Structure, Agency, and the Self in School Food Reform***

This study was originally conceived as an exploration of how structuration and institutional theory could be combined to understand actor agency and early stages of institutional maintenance or change within the school food system. As often happens with inductive research of the kind undertaken in this study, the framework that I articulate in what follows emerged as something quite different. As data collection and analysis progressed, it became clear that the theoretical framework needed to more explicitly address the internal dynamics of actors as they construct meaning and the

implications of this for the process of reform. Interviews consistently pointed to this being ultimately what the study was about: how actors defined the “problem,” how their definitions shaped the kinds of solutions they sought, and how the meanings they attached to these solutions were constructed.

The theoretical framework that emerged as a result integrates Giddens’s (1984) theory of structuration to a symbolic interactionist and social constructionist view of reality. This framework facilitates an understanding of how individuals are actively involved in the iterative and dynamic process of reproducing or transforming social structure while at the same time creating meaning and defining social reality at the micro-level. I use this framework to argue that the roles of actors at the center of school food reform and the conflict that exists within them serve as a bridge between the day-to-day interactions of individuals in the process of meaning-making and macro-level structural forces. They are not only a bridge, however; they are also “shock absorbers” (Hochschild 1983) of the contradictory forces in this arrangement. Particularly focusing on roles as structures, I articulate how these and the social system of school food both enable and constrain actor agency in different ways. In other words, this framework helps to illuminate how micro-level processes lead to the construction of meaning around roles, while at the same time structural dynamics produce conflict for individuals in the roles most central to school food reform (in the case of the present study, food service directors, food service staff, and students) as meaning is constructed.

Taken together, the theoretical foundation for this study’s framework brings into focus how actors at the center of school food reform have been perceived by

many as resisting that reform and how these perceptions have been constructed by actors who are one step removed from food programs. Interviews conducted for this study affirmed assumptions made in the literature that has been reviewed so far: food service directors were assumed to be intransigent, food service staff had a reputation for being poorly trained and ambivalent, and students were assumed to eschew healthy eating. A framework based in structuration theory and symbolic interactionism allows for a different interpretation, one that brings into focus how these actors, in the process of reform, have been both enabled and constrained by (interpretations of) the structure of school food and how they perceive their role in this reform.

### ***Structuration Theory***

This study is about the interplay between structure and agency in the school food environment, particularly how structure and agency are both constructed and how their relationship is dynamic and iterative. Giddens' (1984) notion of structuration advances sociological theorizing about action in social systems by transcending the traditional dichotomy of determinism versus voluntarism and suggesting a “duality” rather than a “dualism” between structure and agency. Rather than viewing structure as something external that shapes and forms social life, (Giddens 1984) conceives of structure as existing only in and through patterned social activities and relations, which are reproduced across space and over time. As (Archer 1982) explains, “This involves an image of society as a continuous flow of conduct (not a series of acts) which changes or maintains a potentially malleable social world ... ‘Structuration’ itself is ever a process and never a product.”

As actors engage in the iterative process of producing and reproducing social structures over time, they follow “rules” and use “resources” to do so. Although Giddens is highly abstract with his definition of rules and resources, he states that there are two kinds of each. The two kinds of rules are “rules of legitimation” and “rules of signification” (Giddens 1979). Rules of legitimation result in normative regulations that guide an actor through interactions in an organization, such as what kind of activities are rewarded or punished, and help individuals know what is expected of them (Callahan 2004). In contrast, rules of signification are about the signs people use to communicate with one another in daily interaction and the symbolic interpretive schemes that facilitate this process (Callahan 2004). The two types of resources that Giddens (1979) writes about are authoritative and allocative, both of which he suggests actors use to exert power over other people and objects (Callahan 2004). Authoritative resources refer to the authority or power that an actor has over people, such as a person in a formal leadership position. Allocative resources, on the other hand, give actors power over things or objects (Callahan 2004).

Giddens (1979, 1984) is also careful to differentiate between social systems and social structure, though the two are closely connected. The application of rules and resources regularly and over time with a group of actors results in the creation of routines, and these routines are what constitute social systems: recurrent and interdependent social relations between actors or groups. Structure, on the other hand, is comprised of the rules and resources that are properties of social systems. In other words, systems have structural properties—they are not structures in themselves—while structures are the “properties of systems or collectivities, and are characterized

by the ‘absence of a subject’” (Giddens 1979, p. 66). Structuration, then, is the process by which social systems are maintained or modified through the application of structure (i.e. rules and resources).

In addition to his nuanced articulation of an iterative and dynamic relationship existing between structure and agency, Giddens’s (1984) concept of structuration further challenges traditional sociological perspectives by contending that structures are both enabling and constraining for actors. Furthermore, actors are knowledgeable, reflexive, and capable of using their structurally formed capacities in creative and innovative ways. Giddens (1984) explains the enabling and constraining nature of structure with the analogy of learning a first language: individuals do not choose their native language, there are rules they must follow in learning it, and the process of learning a language sets limits to cognition, but at the same time language also greatly expands our practical and cognitive capacities. As Hay (1993, p. 61) expounds, “structures not only limit us, they also lend us our sense of self and the tools for creative and transformative action, and thereby make human freedom possible.

Structuration’s view of the individual as a knowledgeable actor who can be enabled by social structure ultimately implies that if actors are powerful and innovative enough, they can transform the structures that give them the capacity to act (Sewell 1992). However, although actor agency has the potential to be transformative or resistant, it is not necessarily so. Agency can also reproduce social structures (Hays 1994). Therefore, (Cooky 2009) notes, “it is useful to conceptualize agency along a continuum from transformative/resistant to reproductive of social structures” (262).

While structuration theory is useful for thinking about structure and agency in



more dynamic ways than many theoretical perspectives or debates have portrayed them, it has been criticized for not adequately theorizing the actor or, more specifically, the internal dynamics of actors. (Craib 1992) notes that theories of action informed by symbolic interactionism have been under-emphasized by Giddens. Although Giddens (1984) draws from Goffman frequently in his work, he does not draw from the insights that symbolic interactionism offers into the internal dynamics of the individual that gives the individual depth “beyond the practical and discursive consciousness with which Giddens is primarily concerned” (Craib 1992: 135). In the following section I suggest how the work of Mead and symbolic interactionism more broadly can offer a more complex understanding of the internal dynamics of actors in the ongoing process of structuration.

### ***Symbolic Interactionism***

According to Charon (2004: 25), “No perspective in sociology has influenced our understanding of social interaction, socialization, and the social nature of the human being as much as [symbolic interactionism].” The symbolic interactionist perspective grows out of the work of George Herbert Mead (1934), Herbert (Blumer 1969), and others associated with the pragmatist tradition. According to (Mead 1934), a distinctive characteristic of humans is that we have evolved to develop our “minds” and our “selves,” such that we have the capacity to manipulate symbols as we interact and solve problems. In fact, it is through seeking solutions requiring cooperation with others that mind and self arise (Stryker 2008). Humans are also able to respond reflexively to themselves as though the self were an object separate from the self.

As its name implies, symbolic interaction is rooted in the principle that the study of human beings requires the study of human interaction, and this interaction relies heavily on the use of symbols. We typically see a person's action as representing something, a something that we need to interpret to determine what the action is supposed to represent. Therefore, understanding symbols really means that we understand what the symbols represent and can use them with fluency. The primary characteristics of symbols are that they are social, meaningful, and significant: social because they are defined in interaction with others, meaningful because the person using them understand what they represent, and significant because symbols are used intentionally and have meaning for both the recipient and the user of the symbol (Charon 2004). Some examples of common symbols include language, acts, and objects. Words are arbitrary in themselves, but socially agreed-upon signifiers of what they represent. Actions such as a salute, wave, or shrug of the shoulders communicates an intentional message to others. And objects such as a flag, particular kind of flower, or certain model of car hold a significance beyond what is innate to them.

One of the central themes of the symbolic interactionist perspective is that human beings are active participants in their environment; that they are able to act back on it rather than passively responding to it. The "interaction" in "symbolic interactionism" refers to how individuals are not simply influenced by others, but that they also constantly influence one another as they engage back and forth with one another. Humans interact with others and within themselves to define immediate situations "according to perspectives developed and altered in ongoing social

interactions” (Charon 2004: 41). According to Mead (1934), society emerges out of interaction and shapes the individual, but the individual also shapes interaction, and in turn, society. Symbols arise in and are transformed through interaction. They are “guides to what we see, what we notice, how we interpret ... in any situation” (Charon 2004: 54). The interaction that occurs between individuals is equal in importance to the interaction that occurs within the individual and the self, or what happens in the mind of individuals. In other words, we create meaning and understand the world not only through interaction with others but as we process these interactions in our own minds.

The symbolic interactionist view of reality is that it is socially constructed and developed through interaction with others—in other words, objects do not have intrinsic meaning (Blumer 1969). Individuals interpret the world using social definitions, but these definitions develop—at least in part—in relation to something physical, something “real.” Symbolic interactionists refer to this as “the situation as it exists” (Charon 2004: 43). From this theoretical perspective, individuals define their situation as it unfolds; they do not perceive or respond to an objective reality, but rather they act according to how they define it. Because how reality is defined is dependent on social interaction and how people think about it, reality “as it exists” is not what is important, but rather what our definition of it is. That is what we respond to, that is what we act upon. Therefore, to understand the world around us, we must engage in an interpretive process. Furthermore, to understand what humans do, we must understand what their perspectives are, as these are the basis of what people take for granted, how they define situations, and how they act in response to those

situations (Shibutani 1955).

### ***Role Theory***

Symbolic interactionism is part of the subdiscipline of social psychology that focuses on the concept of social interaction, or “the ongoing action that actors take toward one another back and forth” (Charon 2004: 25). Rather than conceiving of a one-way causal influence of other people or groups on the individual, what matters most in social psychology is what occurs between and among actors as they, for example, negotiate meaning and identity or create the social structure around them. In contrast to its counterpart in psychology, social psychology in sociology emphasizes real-life events and the every-day interactions through which individuals are socialized into society. Because identity creation is thought to arise through these social interactions, identity is a central concept in social psychology (Charon 2004; Rosenberg and Turner 1981).

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the “object” in social analysis need not be a physical or natural object; it can be other people or the roles they fulfill in society. This brings us to a discussion of what roles are and how they are socially constructed and negotiated. The question as to what roles are is a central and seemingly simple question in sociology, yet there are two divergent views of roles within sociology, one stemming from the structural functionalism of Talcott Parson (1952) and the other from the dramaturgical perspective developed by Goffman (1959). The functionalist view of a role is that it is “what a person does ... the expectations for behavior” for a person who occupies a certain position or status in

society (Dolch 2003: 394). From this perspective, what a teacher or a student does in a classroom can be understood by examining the expectations that accompany each position. What they do in their position is their role, and the expectations for this behavior are learned through the process of socialization. Therefore, the performing of roles is a mechanistic process by the role incumbent, and role expectations impinge on one's creativity and free will by influencing their behavior in a particular direction.

In contrast to the functionalist view of role, the symbolic interactionist view based on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective is that rather than having roles put on them, individuals take on roles and purposefully act in certain ways to manage the impressions that others have of them in that role. From this perspective, individuals carrying out a role are still aware of the expectations that others have of them, but this does not impinge on their creativity and freedom in carrying out that role. This allows for the possibility of creativity, uniqueness, and unpredictability on the part of the role incumbent (Dolch 2003).

According to Stryker (1980), roles and, more specifically, role conflict and role strain, are critical for understanding the relationship between individuals or groups and social structure. This is because while people take on roles, these roles are the "differentiated relationships" (p. 68) between individuals who, in turn, comprise groups, and groups (as systems of interpersonal relations) build into larger structural units such as bureaucracies or communities and, thus, connect individuals with social structure. This connection provides symbolic interactionism with a way to examine the relationship between individuals and social structure (Dolch 2003).

Briefly, role conflict, as defined by Stryker (1980: 73) "exists when there are

contradictory expectations that attach to some position in a social relationship. Such expectations may call for incompatible performances; they may require that one hold two norms or values which logically call for opposing behaviors; or they may demand that one role necessitates the expenditure of time and energy such that it is difficult or even impossible to carry out the obligations of another role.” This definition implies that role conflict exists when more than one role that a person occupies comes into conflict with another role. However, Coverman (1989) notes that such an occurrence is more accurately described as “role overload,” or “having too many role demands and too little time to fulfill them” (Coverman 1989: 967). When one of these roles comes into conflict with another, an individual experiences role overload, not role conflict (Hecht 2001). Role conflict occurs when in a single role, an individual has multiple demands such that meeting one makes meeting another difficult or even impossible. Both definitions are widely used, though a simple way to resolve this difference between definitions is to differentiate between “intra-role” and “inter-role” conflict, Hecht’s definition describing the former and Stryker’s definition describing the latter. For the purposes of this dissertation, the term “role conflict” will refer more specifically to “intra-role” conflict, unless otherwise noted.

In their discussion of incompatible expectations to which role incumbents are exposed (in this case, school district superintendents), Gross et al. (1958: 248) define role congruency as “a situation in which an incumbent of a focal position perceives that the same or highly similar expectations are held for him” by other actors (in the case of superintendents, for example, by teachers, principals, and the school board). However, there are cases where individuals in a particular role face incompatible

expectations, and this is defined as role conflict. Role incumbents may perceive these expectations to be either legitimate (“perceived obligations”) or illegitimate (“perceived pressures”). Role conflict can occur because an individual occupies two simultaneous and the expectations of each role conflict with one another, or because the expectations of a single role conflict with one another. The former is referred to as “inter-role conflict,” while the latter is referred to as “intrarole conflict” (Gross, Mason, and McEachern 1958: 249). Gross et al. found that school superintendents frequently faced intrarole conflict: teachers expected them to be their spokesperson and leader and to take their side on policy and salary issues, while school board members expected them to represent the board and promote their views to staff. This kind of intrarole conflict is the focus of the present analysis. More specifically, how this kind of conflict is constructed through social interaction and what it means for school food reform.

### ***Application of this Framework to School Food Reform***

The difference between the functionalist and interactionist concepts of role is of central importance to the questions being asked in this dissertation. This is because actors act toward objects (including roles and other social structures) based on how they define them, and this definition arises through social processes. The object itself changes as our use for it changes. The role incumbents at the “front lines” of school food reform are engaged in a process of carrying out their roles as they interpret them, within a social structure as they interpret it, and this can both enable and constrain the kind of reform that others expect. For the purposes of this dissertation, for example, a

food service director may simply be another food industry worker, but because they operate one of the country's most important child nutrition programs makes them more than just another manager. They are also managing a welfare program that is intended to reduce hunger and provide healthy food to students who would not otherwise be able to afford it. Since the NSLP was created more than 60 years ago, the technical role of food service director has not changed as much as the expectations that society has of that role. However, food service directors may perceive their role to be quite different from how the communities in which they work would define it. Likewise, foodservice staff may see themselves as “moms” of the schools where they work, while their job descriptions (their technical roles) would state otherwise. Meanwhile, the role of the school itself—and the student within the school—is debated and the ultimate answer has considerable implications for school lunch. In other words, understanding how individuals define their roles and perceive their identity is central to understanding why they do what they do and why things are the way they are. In the chapters that follow, I explore these set of actors in turn, particularly examining their roles as links between micro and macro levels and as absorbers of the conflict between inconsistent expectations descending and arising from above and below.



## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODS

#### *Research Design*

As I outlined in my theoretical framework, this study is rooted in the understanding that the reality of food in schools and what it means to food service directors, food service staff, and students is contingent on the meaning these actors attach to it. I am seeking to use this framework to understand what school food reform means for actors “on the ground,” what they interpret their role to be in the reform process, and what the answers to these questions mean for prospects for school food reform. Blumer (1962: 192) pointed to the value of qualitative methods for such interpretivist goals when he wrote, “The question remains whether human society or social action can be successfully analyzed by schemes which refuse to recognize human beings as they are, namely as persons constructing individual and collective action through and interpretations of the situations which confront them.” Because I conceive of the social reality I sought to understand as constructed and therefore subjective, discovery of such “reality” required that I explored the meanings comprising reality from the perspective of research participants. Therefore, rather than imposing predetermined categories of what would be meaningful into the research design, I selected qualitative methods that allowed for notions of what was meaningful and important to emerge from what I observed participants say and do as they went about their daily lives.

My motivations for choosing qualitative methods include the emphasis these methods place on inductive rather than deductive analysis, on discovery rather than

verification, and on understanding rather than explanation (Husen 1999; Patton 1990 ). The inductive approach I took with this research allowed the design to unfold in unexpected directions based on the perspectives of research participants. As Emerson (2001: ix) states, “The possibility of discovery requires openness to the unexpected and the un-hypothesized.” My flexible research design allowed what was most meaningful to emerge out of observations and interactions in schools rather than my preconceived notions of what would be important.

The qualitative methods I employed in this study also allowed me to understand in great depth and detail an issue about which many people have a superficial understanding. Poppendeick (2010) noted among her reasons for employing similar methods in her research about the same broad topic of food in schools that she was struck by two observations early in her research: first, how little many local school food activists knew about the National School Lunch and School Breakfast program, whose rules constrain local food service operators; and second, how public policy and reforms fail to reflect the everyday realities of school food service programs. A great deal of research has been done surveying the general landscape of food in school across the country and in individual states (Budd 2006; Cho 2004; Cullen 2007; French, Story, and Fulkerson 2002; Pateman 1995; Probart 2006; Story and Neumark-Sztainer 1999; Young and Fors 2001) and as time goes on there has been a proliferation of experimental studies to determine factors that influence student decision-making in cafeterias (Bartholomew and Jowers 2006; Just 2009; Neumark-Sztainer et al. 2005; Suarez-Balcazar, Redmon, Koubam, Hellwig, Davis, Martinez, and Jones 2007). Qualitative methods provided me with the tools to

supplement the various kinds of research that has already been done on a macro and experimental level to generate an intimate familiarity with a specific context, to know that context well, and inductively explore relationships between the structure of school food and the actors reproducing it over time.

The data collection for this study took place in three phases spanning two years, beginning in March of 2008 and ending in June 2010. The first phase of the research involved ethnographic observations and individual interviews at Lakeside and Longview schools. In the spring of 2009, I added two rural high schools to the study because of the contrast they provided for both their rural setting and because the nutritional focus of their school lunch program varied from that found at Lakeside. In the third phase of this study, in the spring of 2010, I concluded my research by conducting focus group interviews with students at each of the four high schools. During this time I also conducted follow-up interviews with key informants whom I spoke with in earlier phases of the research. Over the course of my research, I performed nearly 150 hours of observation across the four schools. I also conducted a total of 60 individual interviews, 11 focus group interviews, and ongoing informal interviews with the approximately two dozen food service staff members I observed over the course of this research. The sample extensiveness for this study was typical of what (Sobal 2001) and (Safman 2004) found in their reviews of decades-worth of studies about health and nutrition education. Approximately two-thirds of the adults I interviewed were women, due in part to female-dominated school food service sector, while the gender balance was more even among students: about 45 percent were male and 55 percent were female. Two adults among the 65 I interviewed were African

American and the rest were white, while the student population was more racially diverse: approximately five percent were African American, five percent Latino, and three percent Asian American. In addition to interviews with these participants, I also collected print materials for document analysis that included school lunch menus, school and community newspaper articles, the School Nutrition Association's monthly magazine, and the minutes recorded from community meetings about food in school.

I selected my initial research participants based on their relationship with the school food environment. The first person I interviewed in each district was the school food service director, because these were the people who, in addition to school district superintendents, gave me permission to study their programs and allowed me access to their cafeterias and kitchens. It was essential that I entered the sites through these individuals for two reasons in particular. First, on a practical level, food service directors were essentially the "gatekeepers" of the school lunch programs and it was necessary to go through them to gain access to their programs. However, because my research encompassed the entire school food environment, I could have started outside of the cafeteria altogether. It was important to speak with directors first because discourses around food in schools in general have put these actors in particular on the defensive. By speaking with these individuals initially, I hoped I could allay fears they might have about possible bias generated from talking to their critics. Although I had no such bias, previous research about this topic (Morrison 2000) suggested that participants might nevertheless assume that bias. Therefore, it was important to me that directors were my first point of contact in each district.

After speaking with food service directors, I interviewed school food service staff and members of each school district's School Wellness Policy committee, which included school nurses, health and physical education teachers, school board members, parents, and other members of the school community. During interviews, I asked each participant for recommendations of other individuals with whom I should speak and continued this snowball sampling until I reached saturation both in terms of the names being suggested to me and the data I collected in interviews. For my interviews with students, I recruited participants during lunch hours and in health and biology classes. Further details about these interviews are provided later in this chapter.

### ***Research Context and Site Selection***

A number of factors converged for this research project to take place in the particular locations it did. The main reason I chose the cases I selected for this study is related to how I became interested in this topic to begin with. In 2007, I was part of a project with a group of students and community members that sought to understand how local communities were defining, prioritizing, and attempting to address childhood obesity. My role was to interview actors associated with schools, from food service directors to activists, while others interviewed individuals from non-profit organizations, the religious community, and a variety of other community sectors. In combination, the interviews my colleagues and I conducted revealed three assumptions about community attitudes toward obesity: First, everyone can agree that there is a "problem." Second, the solutions are clear, one of which is to serve children healthier food in school. And third, the definition of "healthy" is simple. When the

collective project concluded, I wanted to continue exploring these assumptions in the communities where we began our work. In particular, what I wanted to understand was what change meant from the perspective of actors who are closest to the center of it in schools.

Within the geographic area that the exploratory study encompassed, I selected four high schools that lay along a spectrum from mainstream to alternative regarding the policies they had in place to regulate the kinds of food available in school. Lakeside<sup>5</sup> was the most mainstream school in the study, with policies that for the most part did not exceed what was required by federal and state law. In contrast, Longview was the most alternative school in this study. Consistent with its democratic approach to education, Longview incorporated student involvement and decision-making into the construction of its food environment: students worked with teachers to develop policies about what kinds of food could be sold during the school day, they were involved in the preparation and service of food at lunch time, and they helped grow some of the lunch program's produce in a school garden and greenhouse. Although Longview and Lakeside were located in the same school district and therefore operated under the same food service director, Longview had negotiated a semi-autonomous arrangement with director wherein the financial logistics of the program were handled by the food program's office, but details such as procurement and menu planning were managed independently by Longview's cook.

Jefferson and Glendale schools were selected for this study after it began, because interviews with participants indicated that these schools would provide a

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<sup>5</sup> All names in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

helpful contrast to Lakeside and Longview. Not only were they located in smaller, rural districts, but the food service directors had a reputation for taking a more proactive approach to reform than the director for Lakeside and Longview. The food service directors of Lakeside and Longview's school district articulated a primarily business-oriented approach to running his program, in contrast to the directors in the Jeffersonville and Glendale schools, who sought to prioritize both the business and the nutritional aspects of operating their food service program. Jeffersonville and Glendale were rural high schools whose directors were implementing changes beyond what was required at the state or federal level, but, unlike the case of Longview, they were doing so within the conventional structure of the education system.

Jeffersonville's director had been in her position for over 30 years and her main focus regarding school food reform was on incorporating more whole grains into her menu, particularly items such as whole wheat pasta, whole wheat bread and brown rice. The director in Glendale was new to her position, having replaced someone who resigned amid conflict with the school board over the latter's desire to make rapid and aggressive changes to the food environment. The new director supported the school board's changes and had taken drastic steps in her first two years in the position, such as removing all a la carte items from the lunch line, limiting the hours when vending machines could be used, removing pizza and French fries from the cafeteria's daily options, and incorporating more home-style meals in place of pre-packaged frozen foods.

### ***Research Questions and Data Collection***

As stated earlier in this chapter, the questions I asked in this research project were about what school food reform means for the actors closest to the center of this reform. First, I sought to understand how food service directors and food service staff interpret their role, actions and choices in constructing the school food environment and how they perceive internal and external pressures they face to modify or maintain the existing structure. Second, I wanted to know how students were interpreting their food choices in school and their actions when responding to those choices. The specific questions I posed regarding these two sets of actors were:

- 1) What changes are taking place within the school food environment and what further changes are expected?
- 2) How are actors at the center of this change interpreting these calls for change and their roles in the process?
- 3) What does this mean for the prospect of change?

At the heart of my questions was an interest in understanding how people perceived and interpreted both the structure of food in schools and their role (agency) as actors within that structure. Inherent in these questions is also an attempt to understand where and how power is distributed, how it is manifested, and how actors perceived to be shaping, constraining, or facilitating change in the structure of the school food system. The questions I asked were essentially about what was specifically taking place in a particular context, what it meant for the actors engaged in



that context, and how those actors were interpreting their role as events unfolded. These questions, and the constructionist framework underlying them, made a case study comprised of ethnographic observations, in-depth interviews, focus groups and document analysis an appropriate choice of methods for reasons that I in turn expound upon below.

### The case study approach

The comparative case study approach I used in this research (Stake 1995; Yin 2003) was useful for the depth, detail, and richness of information that it produced regarding a particular issue for a specific group of people—in this case, the school food environment four high schools ranging from mainstream to alternative in three central New York States school districts. In the particular case of the four high schools in this study, the case study approach was useful for capturing “individual differences or unique variations” from one setting to another (Patton 1990 : 54). Yin (2002: 1) notes, “Case studies are the preferred strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context.” This approach is well-suited to addressing how and why questions because these questions deal with relationships and linkages that need to be investigated over time. While case studies can draw from a variety of sources of evidence, mine came from ethnographic observations, individual and focus-group interviews, and content analysis. Each of these are described in more detail below.

### Ethnographic observations

In his preface to *Asylums*, (Goffman 1961) alludes to the usefulness of ethnographies in institutional settings when he states "...any group of persons ... develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable, and normal once you get close to it, and a good way to learn about any of these worlds is to submit oneself in the company of the members to the daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject" (pp. ix-x). While Goffman was writing about the context of total institutions, Thorne (2001) suggests from her extensive field work in educational settings that schools are similar in important ways to the total institutions Goffman (1961) wrote about: for the most part, children do not have a choice about whether or when they will attend school, which school they will attend, who will attend school with them, or what their daily schedule will entail. Furthermore, "Like prison inmates or hospital patients, students develop creative ways of coping with their relative lack of power and defending themselves against the more unpleasant aspects of institutional living" (Thorne, 2001: 231). Thorne cites as an example the "underground economy of food and objects," whereby students clandestinely store items in their desks that they trade with other children in ways that mark boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in social circles.

Previous qualitative sociological work about school food systems at the elementary and middle-school level also illustrates the value of direct participation in and observation of the school food environment. For example, Burgess and Morrison (1998) combined ethnographic observations and interviews in a study based on four multisite case studies. Their project "illustrates the value of detailed description and

explanation in making clear the complex influences on food choice” (Burgess and Morrison, 1998: 211). The influences these authors identified include the fragmentation and marginalization of food-focused education, developments in institutionalized eating, and the social construction of meaning about food and eating by actors as they intersect with the policy and practice of schools (Burgess and Morrison, 1998).

Ethnographic methods are not just comprised of collecting, assembling, and reporting what people do, but interpreting and deciphering the deeper meaning that people attach to what is going on around them and what their place is in it (Janesick 2003). According to Emerson (2001: 31), “Ethnographic description seeks to identify the subjective meaning people attribute to events rather than the ‘objective’ characteristics of such events.” Objective characteristics of actions and events are not what is important, but rather what the subjective meanings are that people attribute to them. Geertz (1973) refers to this as “thick description,” or description of the meaningful structures actors use to produce, perceive and interpret their own and others’ actions. Thick description requires that the researcher understand and convey how participants being studied interpret and find meaning in the events that make up their daily lives, which entails “interpretively understanding and representing the subtleties and complexities of meaning” (Emerson, 1990: 33). That is, thick description requires not just collection of data, and not just collection of meanings, but interpreting the interpretations people make about their reality.

In summary, the objectives, processes, and outcomes of ethnographic observations were consistent with the overall goals of the questions I posed in my

research, because of the processes these questions seek to understand, i.e. how actors (in this case students, food service directors, and food service staff) produce, perceive, and interpret their own and others' actions pertaining to food provision and consumption in schools.

#### In-depth, semi-structured interviews

In conjunction with my observations, I also conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with school food-service personnel, school nurses, teachers, administrators, parents, and school board members to gain their perspectives on the school food system, particularly their views regarding food provision. The use of this kind of interview in combination with my observations was important for obtaining insider perspectives and interpretations of what was happening in the school food environment from those who experienced it daily or directly influenced its structure. According to Yin (2002), interviews are one of the most important sources of information in a case study, and open-ended questions are particularly useful for steering research in directions that are most meaningful to participants. These kinds of interviews have the potential to make important but unforeseen research directions more apparent, because as participants dictate the direction of discussion they reveal what kind of information is most pertinent to the situation at hand.

The interviews I conducted were semi-structured, meaning that I asked the same pre-determined questions in each interview, and after participants responded I followed up with probing questions that allowed me to pursue topics more in depth when necessary. This kind of interview enabled me to “understand and capture the

points of view of other people without predetermining those points of view” by specifying the content to which interviews would be limited (Patton, 1990: 24). When participants responded in unexpected ways or presented new ideas that required further inquiry, I had the flexibility to customize each interview to the person being interviewed. As a result, my experience in interviews was as Hatch (2002) predicts: that the most revealing questions were often those that were developed in response to respondents’ questions.

### Focus Groups

In addition to individual interviews described above, I also conducted focus group interviews with students and food service staff who preferred to participate in these instead of individual interviews. There were two reasons in particular why focus groups were especially useful with these two groups. (Morgan 1997) states that “the simplest test of whether focus groups are appropriate for a research project is to ask how actively and easily the participants would discuss the topic of interest” (p. 17). The application of this criterion to the school food environment indicated the importance of student focus groups in my research, as a study of children’s food choices and experiences in British primary schools by Mauthner et al. (1993) found focus groups to be the most effective method for drawing discussion from students about their food preferences. Although their research plan had not originally included focus groups, after they found individual interviews with students to be “arduous” they experimented with focus groups that replicated the classroom setting where children’s conversation “seemed to flow effortlessly” (Mauthner, et al., 1993: 9). I found that

high school students were willing to speak with me in individuals interviews—and some students did—but focus groups interviews did indeed elicit more discussion than individual interviews did.

Another reason that I conducted focus group interviews was that I expected the topic of food to be sensitive for some students and staff. This is in part due to the judgmental tone in public discourse about unhealthy eating habits among youth and social stigmas regarding weight. I was concerned that students would misperceive my role and be worried that I would judge them, as Morrison (Morrison and Benn, 2000) found in interviews with teachers who took a defensive posture when talking about food in British primary schools. Because students might have assumed that my purpose was to report on bad food habits, or that I was going to make judgments about their diet and weight, focus groups seemed to be an effective way for me to obtain less-censored information from them about their food-related activities during the school day and the most comfortable way to them to share such information with me.

Although focus groups are a highly effective way to learn about how youth talk about issues and meaning-making among peers, they do not capture more private views (Mitchell 1999; Raby 2010). By supplementing focus groups with individual interviews, this research captures both the group and individual discourses around food in schools, which, as I discuss in further detail in chapter six, were not always the same. In brief, students admitted that talking about their discontent with school food was sometimes simply a social activity, a topic that gave students “something to talk about” but was not necessarily as sincere as their comments might suggest. This observation was consistent with how students tended to be more negative about school

food in group interviews than they were in individual interviews. Additionally, students tended to be more open about their Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL) status in individual interviews, while some of those students may have felt uncomfortable speaking as openly in group interviews (though I was surprised at the number of students who talked openly about being FRPL recipients and not being able to afford other options at meal times—an openness that was consistent across each of the four schools).

Because levels of childhood overweight and obesity are a primary motivation for school food reform, it is important to note these levels for the study's schools and among the students who participated. In New York State, the percentage of children and adolescents who are overweight or obese is approximately 30 percent, which is consistent with the national average. Although these data are not available for the individual schools where this research was conducted, observations indicated that the rates were likely lower than the state average, while among the students who participated in interviews the percentage of students was lower still: approximately ten percent

### Document Analysis

According to Hodder (1998: 113), “a full sociological analysis cannot be restricted to interview data. It must also consider the material traces” of a phenomenon, which include written texts such as documents and records. In my research specifically, documents such as food service records and reports, agendas and minutes of school board meetings, and school and local newspaper articles provided

background information that I was not be able to obtain through interviews, and these documents also provided me with another angle through which I could compare and analyze the data I collected through observations and interviews. As Barley and Tolbert (1997) suggest, the people I spoke with were not always aware of the information in document, their memory of events or activities was sometimes inaccurate, and some participants had forgotten certain pieces of information all together. For example, the topic of School Wellness Policies arose in nearly every interview, although very few people (i.e. anyone who was not on the School Wellness Policy Committee in his or her school district) had actually seen the policy in writing.

Hodder (1998) recognizes that the use of documents may at first appear to pose a challenge to the interpretivist perspective from which I approached this research, which places the greatest amount of emphasis on dialogue and interaction with research participants. As Yin (2002) cautions, however, documents are not necessarily more accurate or less biased than interviews of participants, but that these sources of information can be used to corroborate evidence from other sources and they can be valuable for the historical insight they are often able to provided. I addressed this issue by taking the same interpretive approach to documentation that I used with other sources of qualitatively derived data. That is to say, I recognized that, as with my other sources, documentation required interpretation and consideration of the context in which it was written, who wrote it, for what audience, and for what purposes.



### ***Data Analysis***

I obtained participant consent for all interviews I conducted and, when participants were under 19 years of age, I obtained their assent along with parental consent. All but one focus group interview (with food service staff at Lakeside) was audio-recorded, and I recorded my ethnographic observations in a series of journals that I maintained while in the field. I transcribed each of the 11 recorded focus group interviews in their entirety and 30 of the 50 individual interviews in their entirety. The 20 interviews not transcribed in full were with members of the school community who were less central to the food environment and who had less to say about how it operated—generally teachers who were interested in speaking with me, but had little knowledge about or awareness of how school food service programs operated or what was available in cafeterias each day (many faculty bring their own lunches every day and never enter the cafeteria at all). Instead of transcribing these interviews in full, I listened to them and transcribed segments of them that were pertinent to my analysis. These interviews were valuable for documenting the expectation that food service programs “simply change,” but their lack of detail about how that might or could happen made them less dense with the kind of data that was most useful for my analysis.

As I collected my data, I used inductive open-coding to identify emergent themes in my interview transcripts, interview notes, and ethnographic observation notes using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1997). In particular, I developed codes and sub-codes, which I continually refined as I collected and analyzed additional data, to understand the meanings and

interrelationships of emergent themes. Consistent with the theoretical framework I articulated in the previous chapter, grounded theory is guided by an understanding that knowledge and meaning are socially constructed and grounded in the social context within which they occur. The approach is well-suited to the overall purpose of my study, which was to understand individuals' perceptions of reality and construction of meaning as these pertained to the school food environment.

As I expound upon in the chapters that follow, the main theme emerging from this analysis was role conflict: conflict between how food service directors viewed the business and public health aspects of their role in school food reform; conflict between the technical labor food service staff performed for the school as an organization and the emotional labor they performed for students as individuals about whom they cared deeply; and conflict between students-as-consumers versus students-as-learners during the school day. These conflicts represent the intersection of structure and agency in school food reform—the set of expectations actors are saddled with from above and the realities within which they operate on the ground.

### ***Research Limitations***

The strengths of the qualitative methods I selected for this research outweigh the limitations, though these warrant mention here. One of the main limitations of this kind of work in general is that its results are not generalizable to wider populations. I cannot say that what I found in this study will be applicable to all schools in every part of the country, but by knowing the four cases I studied well, I was able to identify relationships and suggest explanations that may be explored in future research in other

contexts. Additionally, these findings may be transferable to other contexts (Lincoln 1985).

In addition to a lack of generalizability, the methods I have used are limited in their ability to address cause and effect. I cannot demonstrate with certainty, for example, that role conflict (specifically that faced by food service directors, food service staff, and students) is one of the reasons school food reform and, more specifically, School Wellness Policies have not been more successful. However, Becker (2001: 319) notes that the goal of the kind of interpretive research characteristic of this study is “not to prove, beyond doubt, the existence of particular relationships so much as to describe a system of relationships, to show how things hang together in a web of mutual influence ... to describe the connections” between what the researcher knows from having been in the field. What I am able to suggest instead are “plausible patterns of influence” (Guba 1999) between the kinds of role conflict I identify, recent policy changes, and current food-related activity in school rather than strict cause and effect relationships. Ultimately, the causal claims I make are based on what I interpret to be most likely, not on what I can strictly deduce mathematically. It is up to those who review my work to interpret for themselves if I have succeeded in making plausible the connections I perceive to exist.

In addition to general limitation of the methods I selected, there were also logistical limitations in my research. Doing research with students under the age of 18 was challenging not because students were not willing to speak with me, but because they needed consent from their parents and had difficulty remembering to return their parental consent forms. Some students appeared to be intimidated by the Institutional

Review Board consent form process itself. For example, many students during my time in cafeterias inquisitively approached me about my work and were interested in talking to me when I told them I was doing research on food in schools. When they were asked to sign a form to be interviewed, however, they became cautious and declined the interview. Recruiting students for focus group rather than individual interviews worked better, because I received help from health and biology teachers who allowed me to use class time to interview students in groups and who also collected forms for me until enough students had returned their forms to conduct a group interview. I was, however, limited to the 50-minute length of class time. Although Krueger (2009) suggest that focus groups lasting no longer than one hour are ideal with young people, in some cases this amount of time was a limitation because students had more to say than we had time to discuss. In some cases, I was able to return to a particular class for follow-up interviews during another class period, but for the most part I was limited to one class period.

The health and biology classes from which students were recruited allowed me to reach a diverse population in terms of socioeconomic status and interest in school food reform, though some bias may still exist. For example, health teachers at Jeffersonville, Glendale and Longview selected classes for me to recruit from based on how likely they thought students would be to participate and take my research seriously. Therefore, the students who participated at these schools in particular were not necessarily a representative sample, though it is important to note that even in this group most students were not particularly reflective about food served in school, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter Six. At Lakeside, students were recruited from

Advanced Placement and remedial biology courses, which produced a more diverse population of participants. Overall, although I was concerned that the students who would be most likely to speak with me would be those who already took an interest in nutrition and school food reform, the minority of students who spoke with me reported such an interest.

Despite these limitations, the qualitative methods I selected for this study were well suited to the overall goal of this research, which was to understand the meaning that actors attach to school food reform and how they understand their role and the roles of others in this process. By observing individuals in their day-to-day routines and allowing them to put their reality into their own words, I was able to understand the process of school food reform from the perspective of those who participate in it daily and are closest to the center of that reform. As previous chapters have indicated, the perspectives of these actors has been largely overlooked in the literature about the food environment in schools. Yet, as the following chapters demonstrate, this perspective is essential for understanding its persistence and change.

## CHAPTER 4

### FOOD SERVICE DIRECTORS AND THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY: ROLE CONFLICT AND AMBIGUITY

The first interview I conducted for this project was with a food service director whose responses to my questions predicted quite well what I continued to find throughout my research. When I asked at the end of the interview for suggestions of other people in the school or district I should speak with, this director said “I’m your number one person. You can talk to some of the managers ... I’ve gotta say that other than people in our own department a lot of people don’t know much about us, including the administration.”

The communities surrounding the school lunch programs in this study were indeed largely unaware of how these programs worked, while at the same time they perceived their requests for change—preferably rapid change—to be resisted by directors in the two most traditional schools in this study, Lakeside and Jeffersonville. Meanwhile, when rapid change did occur in Glendale, the response seemed to confirm what other directors had feared: a backlash ensued, followed by a reversal of the most drastic new policies. In this chapter, I investigate the role expectations that the community surrounding food service programs (including teachers, administrators, school staff, parents, students, professional associations and the USDA) had for their food service directors (also referred to in this chapter simply as “directors”), how these expectations compared to the role expectations directors had for themselves, and how the resulting role conflict and ambiguity impacted efforts to change the school food

environment. In particular, I illustrate how role strain and ambiguity combined to hinder school food reform at the local level by placing the burden of inconsistent policies on the shoulders of directors, who were constrained to realize the kinds of change the wider community wanted to see take place and subsequently alienated in the process of doing what they felt was possible and realistic. I also argue, however, that although structural limitations were a source of perceived resistance, the structure of school food service was also enabling in some instances, as seen in the Longview and Glendale examples. In making this argument, I begin with a brief discussion of insights from role theory, and then move on to describe the changes each school underwent while this study took place, the further changes that School Wellness Policy committee members wanted to see take place, and the obstacles to change cited by all food service directors, regardless of how healthy others perceived their lunches to be.

### ***The Role of Food Service Directors in School Food Reform***

The job of food service director is complex. On one hand, it is a management position with many similarities to other kinds of work in the food industry: the main principle shaping the menu is supply and demand, with foods chosen based on what will satisfy customers and generate necessary revenues. On the other hand, this is not just another segment of the food service industry. Food service directors are the local managers of the federal government's second largest food assistance program in the country and its largest childhood nutrition program. As such, their role is highly bureaucratized and has a normative expectation of providing good quality, nutritious

meals to students so that the anticipated goals of compulsory schooling will not be lost on students who are not nourished well enough to learn.

On the surface, the job description of food service director is simple and straight forward: general responsibilities include menu planning, food ordering, processing of free and reduced lunch applications, and staff management. However, because the school lunch program is a federal one, these tasks are complicated by the bureaucratic strings attached to them. Planning a menu not only entails choosing foods that will be popular to consumers, but also ensuring that those foods fit federal nutritional and financial guidelines. For example, meals must not exceed an average of 30 percent of calories from fat, and they cannot cost more than \$2.50 to produce (including the cost of labor, which is oftentimes higher than the cost of food). The details of food service management in schools will be more fully considered later in this chapter; the focus of this section is to establish the theoretical context for the argument that this chapter makes about how role strain and role ambiguity in the work of Food Service Directors hinders implementation of School Wellness Policies and related initiatives for change.

### Role Conflict

Biddle (1986) defines role conflict as “the concurrent appearance of two or more incompatible expectations for the behavior of a person” (p. 82). In most formulations of this concept, role conflict is detrimental to both an individual and the organization of which he or she is a part. On the part of the individual, role conflict has been associated with higher levels of stress, poor integration into one’s work



environment, lower commitment to an organization, and higher rates of resignation (Biddle 1986; Stryker 1978; Van Sell 1981). There are consequences for the organization as well, particularly in terms of disrupted processes and compromised productivity (Gross, Mason, and McEachern 1958; Kahn 1964; Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman 1970).

Although the concept of role conflict is straightforward, inconsistent and imprecise use of the term has been problematic in the literature. Coverman (1989) notes that the terms “role conflict” and “role overload” tend to be used interchangeably, even though they are distinct concepts. Role conflict is sometimes defined as the simultaneous fulfillment of multiple roles, though this situation is more accurately described as “role overload,” or “having too many role demands and too little time to fulfill them” (Coverman 1989: 967). For example, in their study of student athletes and how participants manage each role, Settle, Sellers, and Damas (2002) define role conflict as occurring when “the demands of a particular role make it difficult for the individual to perform or meet the demands of another role” (p. 574). However, when one of these roles comes into conflict with another, an individual experiences role overload, not role conflict (Hecht, 2001). Role conflict occurs when in a single role, an individual has multiple demands such that meeting one makes meeting another difficult or even impossible.

For example, Hebert’s (1985) qualitative study of special education supervisors found that individuals in that role experienced greater role conflict than other kinds of supervisors. This was because in addition to lacking a clear role description, special education supervisors (and the field of special education in

general) had an uncertain relationships with general education. The cultural values and organizational structure that shaped the early evolution of public education had lasting implications for special education and those in supervisory roles, as was the case with school foodservice in this study.

As this chapter expounds upon later, role conflict is the situation in which the Food Service Directors in this study found themselves. At once placed in a role of business manager required to generate adequate revenues, while at the same time being a local overseer of the government's largest childhood nutrition program, these two tasks were regularly at odds with one another. Further complicating matters was, as noted in the literature, a recently reshuffled "chain of command" (Davis 1951; Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman 1970). No longer subordinate only to Business Managers within a school district, food service directors became answerable to parents, community members, and school personnel in unprecedented ways with the advent of School Wellness Policy Committees after the passage of the 2004 Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act. This chapter argues that the various meanings each set of actors attached to the role of food service directors and to reform itself created a situation in which directors were simultaneously enabled and constrained to realize change.

As Stryker (1980: 74) notes, "Withdrawal from the relationships that are the source of conflict is one available mechanism for role conflict solution." As I discuss later in this chapter, this was precisely the situation that occurred between directors and School Wellness Committees. The latter's focus on nutritional changes to the menu without understanding the reality that directors faced in the management of their program appeared to have played a part in director's subsequent withdrawal from the

process and, subsequently, what School Wellness Policy committee members (accurately or inaccurately) perceived to be a lack of support for school food reform.

### Role Ambiguity

Role conflict is often compounded by role ambiguity (Fried 1998; Senatra 1980), which results from a lack of sufficient information to satisfactorily accomplish one's role (Kahn et al. 1964). From a role theoretic perspective, ambiguity increases the likelihood that a person will be unsatisfied in his or her role and perform it less effectively (Rizzo et al. 1970). The consequences of this for school nutrition programs are that Food Service Directors who are unclear about the kinds of changes expected of them, and/or the specific nutritional standards to which they are being held, will likely have a difficult time effectively responding to calls for change. Furthermore, my research suggests that this difficulty may be interpreted by observers as obstinance or indifference in response to such change.

For example, one of the most contentious issues among the Lakeside School District's School Wellness Policy Committee was how to set standards for "healthy" food in their schools and whether to use a food-based or nutrient-based system in doing so. In food-based systems, food service directors create menus by complying with specific component and quantity requirements established by the USDA (i.e. by choosing five food items to offer from four food components). Nutrient-based menu planning is a computer-based approach that analyzes nutrient content of menu items and menus are planned to meet nutrient standards over the course of a week (School Nutrition Association 2011). However, both of these methods complicated the task of

standard-setting for committee members. To facilitate this process, the Institute of Medicine (2009) released nearly 300 pages of guidelines, but these technical reports sometimes raised more questions than answers for laypeople I spoke with in interviews. This confusion and frustration was well articulated by a fund-raising advisor who sat on a School Wellness Policy Committee and, through her work on that committee, became more sympathetic to the dilemma faced by her district's director, who was widely criticized by the school community:

Well, we looked at the [Institute of Medicine's] a la carte standards ... this one for example says snack items are 200 calories or less as packaged, and contain 200 mg or less of sodium, and no more than 35% total calories from fat, less than 10% of calories from saturated fats, 100% fruits and fruit juices without added sugars ... so in theory they sound like really, this is straight forward, I believe in this, I think this will make healthier kids, they'll learn better, I think we should do this. And then in reality if you go through the vending machine, I think there may be one thing in there ... maybe one thing that meets these standards. So am I okay with kids buying a bag of Sun Chips in the middle of the day? Yeah, I guess. So then what is the right standard? If it isn't this, is it 50% of calories from fat? And a huge missing piece is that I don't have any idea of the impact on food service, because the food service director hasn't been involved in this. And so I don't know, I'd love to see an impact statement from [our director] if we were to go

to these standards. Show me what is on your menu now that couldn't be on your menu anymore. And how would that affect your sales? ... I thought it would be very straight-forward, people have already done this work for us, lets just adopt this and move on. And now I don't think that I can. So that's where I am.

In summary, inasmuch as directors in this study lacked concrete, or concrete and *widely agreed upon* nutritional standards that their communities wanted to see implemented, they experienced role ambiguity. This ambiguity stalled progress, made directors appear intransigent to proponents for change, and created tension between these two parties. What proponents for change, and others in the community, expected from directors—and how these expectations either conflicted with or created ambiguity around their job description—are outlined in the following section.

#### Food Service Director Expectations

Food service directors indicated frustration with the often-conflicting expectations both between and among various groups to whom they considered themselves accountable, particularly administrators, faculty, students, parents, and the community. Their direct supervisors (Business Administrators for the school district) declined interviews for this study, though the reasons each gave for declining indicated that their primary expectation was that food service programs remain financially self-sustaining from year to year. When contacted about interviews, supervisors declined because they felt their involvement in and knowledge of the

program was minimal. They all gave their directors a great deal of autonomy in running the program and viewed their role as financial gatekeeper to be insignificant.<sup>6</sup>

Teachers were the most divided in their attitudes toward school food service among the populations I spoke with, particularly at Glendale where the new director had radically changed the foodservice program to make it more healthy. In this school district, there was backlash not only from students and parents, but from teachers as well. Approximately one-third of the teachers I spoke with regularly purchased food from the cafeteria or vending machines. Among all the teachers with whom I spoke, some thought that the changes were a good idea or a necessary step in improving the school food environment, but most agreed that the measures went too far. Many faculty members I spoke with noted that although concerns about changing menus tend to focus on how students would respond to healthier options, these concerns failed to consider that what was taken away from students would also be taken away from teachers. School cafeterias do not only reflect what teenagers like to eat, they also reflect the way that many Americans in general eat. In other words, most of the faculty who purchased food at school liked pizza and ice cream just as much as the students did, so they did not support taking these items off the lunch line any more than students did.

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<sup>6</sup> Perhaps because of the highly charged political atmosphere around school foodservice in recent years, supervisors seemed hesitant to speak about the topic and preferred to let communication go through the food service directors themselves, even when I explained that I was speaking to a range of individuals within the school system and wider community. These administrators conveyed concern about overstepping territorial boundaries with directors. One eventually agreed to an interview with the condition that the director participate, even though I made it clear I had already spoken with that individual. When I arrived for the interview, the supervisor was unable to attend at the last minute so I conducted a second interview with the director. These interactions, albeit limited, not only indicated a great deal of autonomy for directors, but also an apparent sensitivity around discussions of their work.

Another group that was divided, though to a lesser degree and in different ways, were parents.<sup>7</sup> The views this group held fell into three main categories: parents who were dissatisfied with what was offered and either had their children pack their own lunches or decide for themselves what to eat for lunch; parents who were unaware of what was served in cafeterias and sent food from home or let their children decide for themselves what to eat; and parents who were more concerned about their child's freedom of choice in the cafeteria than they were about nutrition. Most parents I spoke with were unsatisfied with the food options at school and had their children bring lunch from home or they let them decide what to eat and trusted them to make responsible decisions at school. At the same time, most parents did not actually know what kind of food was available in the cafeteria—they either made their assessments of the food based on how their children talked about it, or they made assumptions about what the food was like based on common stereotypes or their own experiences a generation ago. For some parents, this lack of knowledge about what was in the cafeteria translated into packing lunches for their children because they assumed the food did not meet their personal standards; for others it translated into allowing their children to make their own decisions about what to eat for lunch. Regarding a lack of parental awareness of what was served in the cafeteria, one cafeteria manager I spoke with stated:

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<sup>7</sup>This group overlapped with the “community” group, as most of the members of the community supporting change in school food had school-aged children. Therefore, this section discusses parents and community members as one group.

I think [we should make] the public more aware of where the food service program is ... [and] invite parents to the schools to see the food service program, see what goes on. I'd love to have some of the parents in here to see what goes on. Especially see how their child acts [laughs]. I think they just don't have any idea what kind of meals we're serving.

A small number of parents, much like the faculty described earlier in this chapter, actually opposed changes to the food environment because they felt their children should be able to eat whatever they wanted to for lunch. For these parents and their children, the food in the cafeteria reflected the kinds of food eaten at home, so they were not concerned about the availability of it on a daily basis. The parents in this group felt not only that the food was healthy enough, but that their children should have the freedom to eat whichever foods they wanted to eat. In other words, personal freedom to choose whatever they wanted to eat for lunch was more important to these parents than eating nutritious food (whatever "nutritious" meant).

What the students themselves (as I expound upon in chapter six) wanted from their foodservice program were quality ingredients, a menu with variety, and food that "tasted good."<sup>8</sup> They also wanted a different approach to nutritional change in the menus. On one hand, students opposed recent changes because their focus on "healthy" translated almost exclusively to a switch to brown rice, whole wheat pasta

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<sup>8</sup> The subjective nature of the term "good" led to further conflict for directors. Although students agreed for the most part on what their favorite dishes were, there was disagreement about the appeal of other items.



and bread, and an absence of French fries. All of these changes were unpopular, and they were the main focus in each school except Longview, which took a different approach to planning healthy meals. However, the majority of students at each of these schools wanted other kinds of “healthy” change brought to the foodservice program. The most popular idea for change among students was to have a salad bar in the school or, if one already existed, to improve the quality of the fruits and vegetables available in the school. Contrary to popular assumptions, students welcomed the idea of having more fruits and vegetables available at school; what kept them from eating more of these things were the quality and way they were prepared (i.e. often over-cooked) in the cafeteria.

Among all of the stakeholder groups to whom food service directors were accountable, role expectations for food service directors were most consistent between students and the staff who served them their meals. As I discuss further in the following chapter, food service staff found themselves in a unique situation of “serving two bosses” (Troyer, Mueller, and Osinsky 2000): food service directors and students. Interviews and observations revealed that, particularly because food service staff reaped the greatest amount of job satisfaction from their non-technical work and interactions with students, they allied their interests with those of students over management. They wanted to serve students food they would like and appreciate, and they did not want to be the face of change that they did not always believe was necessary. When the objectives of food service directors were at odds with the priorities of students, and as I discuss in more detail later in this chapter, tension resulted between directors and their staff.

In addition to the above stakeholders, food service directors also answer to other directors through buying groups and through their membership in the School Nutrition Association, and they are also (and ultimately) accountable to the federal government. Interviews revealed that other food service directors both enabled or constrained efforts at reform, particularly through participation in buying groups. As I explain later in this chapter's section about food procurement, directors (particularly those in smaller districts) make food purchases and select USDA commodity foods in buying groups to maximize economies of scale. However, this means that food service directors must rely on other directors to request similar items. For the food service directors at the Jeffersonville and Glendale schools, other directors in their buying groups made it difficult to obtain whole grain alternatives to white breads, pastas, and rice, particularly earlier on in the reform process.

The School Nutrition Association (SNA) and the USDA's Team Nutrition are two groups at the macro-level who have somewhat conflicting role expectations for food service directors. The SNA is the national professional association of food service directors, managers, and other workers. Whereas the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service generates policies pertaining to school food service, the SNA is instrumental in both shaping those policies and assisting food service programs with carrying them out. The parallels between these two organizations extends to the expectations that both have for food service directors. On one hand, both the USDA and the SNA publish, for example, user-friendly materials that project an image of healthy, balanced meals made from minimally-processed and fresh ingredients. On the other, the realities behind this image are well illustrated by the advertisements in

the SNA's monthly publication, *School Nutrition* and information the USDA lists on its website. In *School Nutrition*, food company advertisements appear throughout the publication's pages promoting products using nutrient and food-based food service language and guidelines to promote processed foods. For example, a 2009 advertisement for popular snack crackers, the kind that many people I spoke with considered "junk food," referred to the product as "a satisfying snack that is a great trayline item that counts as 1 bread serving ... [and] meets key nutritional requirements of  $\leq 35\%$  calories from fat,  $\leq 10\%$  calories from saturated fat, and  $\leq 35\%$  sugar by weight per serving." They also tailor advertisements to specific commodities, encouraging directors to process their commodities into a given company's particular chicken patty sandwiches, pizzas, or other items. In the articles that fill the pages between these advertisements, the SNA projects a sterilized image of school food service that is at odds with the image of school food projected by advocates for reform.

Similarly, the USDA (2008) encourages using commodities for popular processed foods so nutrition programs can save money and stretch their commodities further, and so the food industry can benefit from the opportunities to market their products. The following chart from their website lists the most popular of the 70 processed foods:

**Table 2: USDA Processed Commodities**

<b>Basic Commodity</b>	<b>Processed End Products</b>
Pork	Rib-shaped patties, cooked sausage patties and links
Beef	Charbroiled patties, taco filling, meat balls
Frozen Fruit	Fruit pops, turnovers
Chicken	Nuggets, patties, roasted pieces, breaded chicken
Turkey	Turkey ham, bologna, breast deli slices
Flour, mozzarella, tomato paste	Pizza

Source:

[http://www.fns.usda.gov/FDD/processing/cp\\_faqs.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/FDD/processing/cp_faqs.htm)

Food service directors indicated in interviews, particularly in reference to the USDA commodities program, the messages were conflicting. One set of messages is about the priority the USDA and SNA place on wholesome food and nutrition, while the other is about procuring products that are inconsistent with this objective.

Although each group of stakeholders listed above had its own set of concerns regarding the school food environment, the common sentiment among each group was that they wanted change, and they wanted it to happen quickly. Furthermore, with the exception of very few people, these individuals were not familiar with the how school foodservice operates. Some were unfamiliar with changes already underway, so their requests appeared redundant and uninformed to food service directors. Almost everyone I spoke with was not aware of how programs were financed or about other logistical details involved in running the program. This is to be expected, considering that school foodservice operations are complex and difficult to understand.

Compounding this complexity was the reality that until recently, directors had the kind of autonomy that the Business Administrators I spoke with indicated. As long as they covered their costs from year to year, they were accustomed to receiving relatively little scrutiny by the superiors and members of the school or wider community.

School Wellness Policies (and the community concerns about childhood obesity these policies symbolized) threatened this autonomy, and in a number of ways. First, by mandating that the policy be developed by committees comprised of school and community members, directors no longer had sole authority over their programs. Rather than operating autonomously, they were essentially being asked to do their job as part of a team. They had to listen to parents in ways not previously required, and they had to be responsive to the community in concrete ways that had not been asked of them before. As they sat on wellness committees, they were viewed by many members as antagonistic toward change. In Jeffersonville, for example, the Wellness Committee lost momentum when two members who most strongly supported change resigned because they felt the new policy call only for nominal changes that were not in the best interest of children.

The responses of food service directors to their community's requests for change tended to fall into two categories. First, every director I spoke with listed changes they had implemented in an earnest effort to address community concerns. At Lakeside and Jeffersonville, where Wellness Committee members were the least satisfied with change, food service directors felt that as they responded to the community and risked their own bottom lines, community members did not appreciate the steps that were being taken and instead provided disincentives by continuing to

critique the job they were doing. Second, directors believed that their food was as healthy as they could make it without losing revenues, and their definitions of healthy clashed with those of many supporters of school food reform.

Related to the above points, each food service director had, to one degree or another, some experience trying to provide healthier food options to students, but had been met with too much resistance to remain sustainable. In Glendale, where the most changes were implemented (including removal of all a la carte and vending machine sales during lunch), parents, students, and even faculty were unhappy with the changes and some of these changes were eventually either reversed or altered to satisfy students, parents, and faculty.

All of these have in common that 1) Food service directors felt they could not change as much as many people wanted them to because of limitations, such as maintaining revenues and serving food that students will actually eat, and 2) perceptions of what constitutes "healthy food" were variable.

### Role Ambiguity and the Meaning of "Healthy"

Early on in this research, a community organizer noted in an interview, "Different people have different ideas about what constitutes 'healthy food.' Some think it has to be vegan to be fully healthy, some are just happy if they can get a vegetable on the plate." This individual also observed, "There is a disconnect between what people say and what people do about healthy food in schools. They'll say they made all these changes, but when you look at the menu sometimes it doesn't seem that radical." What I focus on in the rest of this chapter is how these two observations are

connected: how the term “healthy” is constructed and how the contested nature of what constitutes “healthy food” created role ambiguity for food service directors and, by extension, their staff.

Recognizing the multiplistic nature of “healthy eating” conceptions is important when trying to understand attempts at nutritional change. Many complexities are involved in the ways people define health and demonstrate that terms that may appear to have a universal definition (such as “healthy food”) in reality have a wide variety of meanings (Falk, Sobal, Bisogni, Connors, and Devine 2001). Even among doctors and nurses carrying out health promotion programs, the differing definitions of healthy eating has undermined efforts and contributed to role confusion by the individuals carrying them out (McWilliam, Spence-Laschinger, and Weston 1999).

Paquette’s (2005) review of the literature about perceptions of healthy eating found that mainstream perceptions of healthy eating are most often conceptualized through either food choice (e.g. fruit, vegetable, and meat consumption); food components (particularly low levels of fat, sugar and salt); quality attributes (such as “fresh,” “unprocessed” and “homemade”); and concepts of balance, variety, and moderation, though these terms were also found to be contested and have multiple meanings for participants in the reviewed studies. As I outline below, these descriptive conceptualizations of what constitutes “healthy eating” not only resonated with the data collected in this study, but they also point to how the variety of meanings that individuals attached to the term “healthy” create ambiguity for food service directors vis-à-vis what advocates of “healthier” food are asking for.

### *Food Choice*

When participants were asked about changes they have made or would like to make in their food environment, the most frequent response they gave was some variation of a goal toward incorporating “more fruits and vegetables.” In addition to fruits and vegetables, considerable emphasis was placed on whole grains, particularly in pastas and breads. In Paquette’s (2005) review of healthy eating conceptions, “whole grains” had not yet become a nutritional buzz-phrase, but since that article was written there has been much more emphasis on whole grain foods (Mancino, Kuchler, and Leibtag 2008; Marquart 2006; Sobal, Beckman, Pham, Croy, and Marquart 2010). This surge in attention was reflected in responses to my questions about recent changes to the foods offered in school, which I describe further below.

The NSLP requires that schools serve fruits and vegetables as part of a complete reimbursable meal. However, most critics of the program with whom I spoke pointed out that the fruit was often under- or over-ripe, vegetables were often over-cooked, and the way these foods tasted as a result made them unappealing to students. Emphasis on “100% fruit juice” was frequently mentioned as well (e.g. the NSLP/NBP only includes 100% fruit juice in its meals, and some vending machines sell 100% fruit juice), but there was also an abundance of high-sugar beverages and “fruit-ades” that only contained a small percentage of real fruit juice.

The real issue with fruits and vegetables, however, seemed to be about quality, perhaps best exemplified in questions participants raised about what constitutes a “healthy” salad option. At Lakeside, the “tossed salad” was composed of a small amount of shredded iceberg lettuce (which students noted was often wilted or brown)



that was placed in a Styrofoam cup with three grape tomatoes, a packet of croutons on the side, optional onions, and a choice of dressings. Not surprisingly, the salad wasn't popular at this school, and the low number of purchases reinforced the food service director's perception that students didn't actually want and wouldn't eat healthier items. However, salads were extremely popular in schools where the salad bar had more options (for example, Longview offered leafy green lettuce, carrots, cucumbers, tomatoes and virtually every student who went through the line took—and ate—a salad with their lunch).

In addition to fruits and vegetables, “whole grains” had become perhaps the most popular ingredient that school food service programs were promoting (Burgess-Champoux, Marquart, Vickers, and Reicks 2006; Rosen, Sadeghi, Schroeder, Reicks, and Marquart 2008; Sadeghi 2009). Recent attention to whole grains provided the most glaring illustration of how emphasis on a single ingredient at the expense of the nutritional whole could ultimately reinforce the existing food environment. For example, Jeffersonville switched its pizza crust to whole wheat, but pizzas still had generous amounts of cheese and few vegetables offered as toppings. At Lakeside, the “meat-lovers” pizza was a popular option: a piece of cheese pizza with pepperoni and a scoop of sausage placed on top. The most common use for whole wheat buns were chicken patty sandwiches, which had been breaded and deep-fried. Perhaps the best illustration of how this singular focus on whole grains failed to point to meaningful change was in Jeffersonville, where the food service director made arrangements with a food processing company to have the school's chicken patties processed with whole grain, rather than white, breadcrumbs.

### *Food Components*

Food service directors and others who shape the food environment in schools tended to universally mention the importance of reducing fat, sugar, and, to a lesser extent, salt in the foods they made available to students. The two most significant examples of how this brought about change in offerings to students related to fat and sugar. Within a few years of when this study began, all of the schools in this study removed deep-fryers from their kitchens. Although students—and even some faculty members—were unhappy about the disappearance of French fries from their daily options, school food critics were happy to see this change, food service directors were happy to have this evidence of their willingness to change, and food service staff were happy not to be going home every day, as one staff member described it, “smelling like a French fry.”

Likewise, research participants mutually agreed that sugar ought to be reduced in offerings to students. The two most frequently cited examples of where change had occurred were with beverages and candy sales. At the national level, beverage companies voluntarily removed soda from school vending machines, and, as mentioned previously, the USDA does have standards regarding what they refer to as “foods of minimal nutritional value,” (FMNV) or “junk food.”

Although the removal of deep fryers resulted in the disappearance of French fries in schools, it did not translate into the disappearance of deep-fried foods. Breaded and battered food options remained on the menus; while these were baked at the schools, they had been flash-fried by the processor before being frozen and shipped to schools. Across the menus at three schools (not including Longview,

which did not serve prepackaged foods) such foods included mozzarella sticks, clam strips, shrimp poppers, fish patties, and chicken tenders, nuggets, and patties.

Whereas school cooks had previously given these items a second deep-frying to reheat them, cooks were now baking them in ovens instead. So while school food service staff sometimes said that they no longer served deep-fried foods, this claim was misleading because of what “deep fried” meant to them.

The foods that served as substitutes for the French fries, while not deep fried, raised other questions. Here is how a staff member at Lakeside described what they did to replace French fries:

We came out with rice, baked potato, pasta salad, we alternate stuff.

But the rice and baked potatoes are on every day as sides, the pasta salads we alternate, macaroni salads. I mean, they aren’t the most nutritious, but they’re not deep-fried, but you’ve eliminated some of the fat content.

In my observations of this cafeteria, the most popular substitute for French fries was rice (usually white), which students ordered with almost every meal and drizzled with soy sauce. Students occasionally chose baked potatoes, but more often they selected pasta salad if it was available. Surprisingly, according to the nutrition information offered on the school district’s child nutrition program website, pasta salad had the highest fat content of any lunch item, with 35 grams per serving. This

was because the salads were heavily dressed either in oil or mayonnaise, and they came prepackaged, so food service had no control over their salad's content.

The amount of sugar that remained available to students in a la carte and vending snacks and beverages likewise pointed to institutional maintenance in the school food environment. Although sodas have been removed, in their place were primarily equally sugary beverages such as fruit-ades, sports drinks, and other beverages that have little to no actual fruit juice in them. Water was increasingly popular, but the most popular options were sports drinks and "fruit-ades".

As mentioned earlier, the USDA does ban the sale of "Foods of Minimal Nutritional Value" in schools, but their guidelines resulted in seemingly arbitrary food choices in a la carte lines and vending machines. This is because the standards have not changed since 1979, before children were consuming the amounts of calories, saturated fat, and sodium they currently do (Center for Science in the Public Interest 2009). When the definition of FMNV was created, it was focused on making sure foods sold in schools had five percent or more of the recommended daily intake levels of protein, vitamin C, calcium, and other nutrients. As the Center for Science in the Public Interest (2009) points out, under these guidelines, schools are not allowed to sell items such as seltzer water, chewing gum, hard candy, breath mints, life savers, and jelly beans. However, they can (and often do) sell candy bars, potato chips, ice cream bars, cookies, snack cakes, and muffins.

### *Quality Attributes*

The three schools in this study that were making the most changes to their food environments had food service directors and/or individual kitchen cooks or managers who tried to work with fresh and unprocessed foods as much as possible and to use these ingredients to make homestyle, or “from scratch,” meals for students. The new food service director at Glendale had a particularly strong reputation for the efforts put forth to redesign menus so they contained more of this kind of cooking. At Jeffersonville, the director and the cook both personally enjoyed cooking as a hobby and had been cited by some participants as an important part of what made the food environment at that school healthier than that of other schools in the region. At Longview, the kitchen’s head cook made virtually all of the lunches from scratch, with minimal “heat and serve” items on the menu.

Emphasis on home-cooked, fresh, and unprocessed foods certainly had some positive outcomes for school lunch menus. Increases in these kinds of foods meant a reduction in, for example, the kinds of breaded and deep-fried items previously mentioned. However, other kinds of “homemade” or “homestyle” foods did not necessarily meet the definition of healthy that others espoused. At Glendale, the kinds of casseroles that appear on a regular basis tended to be meat and cheese heavy; “comfort foods” for the most part that did not match conceptions of healthy advocated by those supporting more fresh fruits and vegetables and less meat. I was also surprised when I asked a cook Jeffersonville, who had a reputation for making many of the meals from scratch, about the percentage of meals cooked that way: it was just 30%, and this figure included pizza, which was served once a week.

Homemade cooking was also found in the a la carte line. At Longview, for example, which did have noticeably healthier foods for the most part, the head cook acknowledged the need to offer many of the same kinds of a la carte options found in other schools. One difference, however, was that some of the cookies and brownies were baked from scratch, which students and staff at this school considered superior to pre-packaged, name-brand counterparts. This was another example of how the attribution of “home-made” could be misleading in the way the food service programs used the term.

### *Balance, variety and moderation*

The themes of balance, variety and moderation also appeared throughout my interviews with participants.

You know, they say this is a [different kind of] school, so everybody up here is vegetarian. You set pepperoni pizza in front of them and that's what they want. They don't want tofu. Or if you set tofu down in front of them, they're gonna walk down the hill to get pepperoni pizza from [the local pizza place]. It's not a captive audience for a lot of the kids. So we'll have to serve stuff that they'll eat and try to balance the healthy with it. [Longview participant]

I guess I worry a little bit about going too extreme too fast for people. I worry that people will reject the entire notion [of change] if they feel like it's not something that's immediately relatable ... so it's striking a balance between ... people [who] think ... "Oh yeah, we want healthier food in our schools" and getting them on board with the a la carte, the vending machines, the fundraising ... and I struggle myself with where the line is in terms of moderation. Right now some of the elementary schools have gone to selling ice cream once a week. Once a week! Doesn't seem like such a bad thing. Do we create a standard that takes away even that, that takes away choices to buy a chocolate chip cookie in the line? I'm not sure I'm ready for that yet. And I understand the point that ... if you offer unhealthy choices then students may never select the healthier choices, but I just feel like there will be backlash and not embracing of the policy if we go so far that we take away all things that people consider "treats." [Wellness Policy Committee member]

The concern this participant had about backlash was actually realized at Glendale. When the new food service director started in the position, the pizza and calzone line, French fries and all a la carte items were taken off the line, vending machines were turned off during lunch, and healthier lunch items were introduced in their place. The backlash came not only from students, but also parents and faculty members who were upset that these things were no longer offered. Eventually, a

limited selection of a la carte items returned, ice cream reappeared one day per week, and the vending machines were turned back on during lunch periods. The school cafeteria was still noticeably different than it was under the former food service director, but the changes were not as sweeping or as immediate as the new director—and the school board that was behind these changes—was hoping they would be.

### Changes already in place

Both in response to and, in previous years, anticipation of School Wellness Policies, food service directors I spoke with reported they had made a number of changes, particularly in the three years leading up to this research. Jeffersonville's director switched entirely to products with over 50% whole wheat flour. The cook no longer received prepackaged frozen pizzas and made pizza from scratch with whole wheat crust, served only brown rice, and switched entirely to 1% or skim milk. The director also changed suppliers, from one whose produce had been uneven in quality to one that had consistently higher quality produce.

The new food service director in Glendale made what were referred to by this director as “a lot of really radical changes” in the first two years of being in the position. A la carte food sales were discontinued, vending machines were turned off before the end of lunch, whole grain breading was used on chicken patties and nuggets, all other bread was switched to whole wheat, and the cafeteria began to sell brown instead of white rice. This food service director was also known for introducing a lot of home cooking, particularly casseroles and soups. In the elementary schools, the food service director organized food presentations with



students to introduce them to each ingredient in new foods, such as hummus (which was particularly popular among younger children). Students were also shown what real cheese and fresh fruits and vegetables look like so these foods would be more familiar to them. Additional changes included a snack kiosk that was open at the end of the school day, where students could purchase healthy snack foods before continuing onto sports practice or other extra-curricular activities, and a vending machine that sells protein bars, granola bars, and other pre-packaged “health foods.”

At Lakeside, the food service director sent a memo to parents outlining almost two dozen changes that had taken place in the cafeteria as of 2008. These changes included removing all deep-frying equipment from the kitchen (which occurred at the other schools as well), replacing processed chicken products with white breast meat, replacing multi-serving snacks with single-serving snacks (though beverages were still in multi-serving bottles), increasing daily options of fresh fruits and vegetables, increasing low-fat snack and milk options, and increasing multi-grain and whole-wheat breads on the menu. The memo also listed changes such as the removal of all candy products, soda products, high fat snacks, and white breads that, as I discuss later, observations and interviews revealed were not completely accurate.

### ***Constraining and Enabling Structures***

Despite these changes that food service directors had made, most critics in the community were still unsatisfied with the changes implemented in schools. From their perspective, glaring problems still existed with the food that was served in the schools. In particular, some of the items that were removed had been replaced with equally

problematic substitutes, and the changes already implemented had in some cases been exaggerated or reversed. In response to these concerns, food service directors had two responses, one explicit and the other implicit. The first response was that individuals who did not work directly in school foodservice did not understand how complex the change process was due to budgetary, procurement, and customer preference limitations. As I explain in further detail below, these three structural aspects of school food created the primary sources of role conflict for food service directors. At the same time, directors' implicit response was denial that the programs needed as much changing as critics called for. This is where role ambiguity emerged as a central constraint. Their definition of healthy eating conflicted with others' definitions, creating a lack of clarity for directors about what exactly their communities wanted or how they would implement the changes being asked of them. In this section, I outline how food service directors were constrained by structures that produced role conflict and follow this with identification of the ways in social structures also enabled food service directors as they sought to reform their programs.

### Program financing

Probably not surprisingly, funding was the primary reason nearly all food service directors in the study gave for why school breakfasts and lunches were not healthier. School lunch programs do indeed operate under heavily strained budgets, but the specific ways in which this is an issue are complex and multi-dimensional. NSLP financing is an extremely confusing and widely misunderstood arrangement, so it can be difficult to tease out what the specific barriers are from one district to

another. In all cases, however, the bottom line is that food service directors are expected to run their food programs independently from the school district's budget, essentially as businesses responsible for recovering their own costs while meeting consumer demand. Although independent businesses do not operate in an absence of laws and regulations, these are not as strict or constraining as those governing food in schools. School food service programs are more limited in what kinds of food they can sell, what prices they can charge, and they are increasingly being asked to make their food offerings more nutritious without receiving any additional resources to do so. The greatest specific financial barriers food service directors and others familiar with the program financing listed when discussing this issue were rising food, fuel, and labor costs and FRPL reimbursement processes

The largest financial strain mentioned in this study were by far labor costs. In Lakeside's school district, the food service program paid for all labor and related expenses and as a result 53% of every dollar went to labor costs and 44% went to food costs—at a time when insurance costs were rising by 12-15% every year. As one school food service director stated, “[In addition to labor], with the price of foods [and] fuels, everything is kind of sky rocketing right now.” Rising food and fuel prices around the time when this research began also presented considerable obstacles for school nutrition programs. During the 2007-08 school year, milk prices rose by 12 percent, cheese by 15 percent, bread by 15 percent, and eggs by 31 percent. Yet at the same time, the NSLP increased its financial support to school districts by only three percent.

An important source of revenue for school food service programs is federal reimbursement for free and reduced-price lunches (FRPL). The number of students who qualify for FRPL determines a large portion of program budgets, yet many qualifying families do not enroll for this benefit, which reduced the amount of money food programs receive from the government.<sup>9</sup> Low FRPL participation rates can occur for a number of reasons, including lack of awareness about eligibility, preference not to take what families or students might consider a “hand out”, the feeling that the paperwork is not worth it for a meal that’s relatively inexpensive in the first place, or even something as simple as wording on the letter to parents, as was the case in the districts where this study took place. For example, in the letter the Department of Social Services uses to notify parents that they qualified for free or reduced lunch in the county where this research took place, the first line informed parents that they qualified for free or reduced-price lunches, so many parents didn’t read any further to realize they needed to return the letter to the school to start receiving the benefit. The reporting of FRPL is also inaccurately low, because the government requires districts to report their numbers in mid-October, although many forms are turned in later in the school year. If reporting was not required until later in the year it would more accurately reflect the real rate of need.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Students from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level are eligible for free meals. Those with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals. The price of reduced meals is set at the district level, but can be no more than 40 cents. Students from families with incomes over 185 percent of poverty pay a full price, though their meals are still subsidized to some extent.

<sup>10</sup> FRPL data are even more inaccurate at the high school level, where students are under-represented in school lunch enrollment due in part to students’ refusal to enroll because of the stigma attached to it. This is further problematic considering that FRPL data are used to determine a school’s eligibility for Title I funds, it is often used as a proxy for low-income status by researchers and by the federal

In New York, state reimbursement rates had not increased in 25 years, and they actually decreased in 2008 by 2% as part of an across-the-board cut to all state budgets. To further frustrate the situation, food service directors noted that it was often the case that state funds for reimbursement would be delayed in reaching them, so they had to find ways to cover their costs until they were eventually reimbursed by the state.

### The Commodity Foods Program and other Sourcing Requirements

Each year, directors receive a set dollar amount's worth of commodity foods they can order from the government based on their lunch participation rates. In 2009 this rate was 19.5 cents per meal, but this figure changes from year to year (School Nutrition Association 2011). The foods must be surplus commodities grown by domestic farmers, and foods available through the commodity program include meats, cheese, butter, fruits and vegetables, beans, fruit juices, rice, vegetable oil, flour, pasta, and other grain products. Often misunderstood as "free" food, these government commodities actually do have some considerable costs attached. First, food service directors must pay a fee per case of food to the government for warehouse storage and for transportation from the warehouse to the school, which is deducted from their free and reduced lunch payments. The fee for the schools in this study was over \$2.00 per case for both storage and for transport, for a total of almost \$5.00 per case of food.

Second, the cost of commodity foods is not only financial, but also occurs in terms of additional barriers that arise due to the mechanics of how they are distributed.

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government for educational funding. Therefore, high schools receive disproportionate levels of this funding.

First, and at the most basic level, food service directors stated that commodity foods were problematic because the misunderstanding that they are free contributed to the sentiment that school meals should cost less than they do or that it should be easier to make lunches healthier with the current level of government support. Second, directors in smaller districts must negotiate with other directors with whom they share storage warehouses to determine which foods they will buy. The foods have to be order in large quantities, and smaller districts can only order if others will share it, and not all districts agree on what they would like to order. For example, the food service director in Jeffersonville had been trying to order brown rice through the commodity program, but other directors in the same buying group wanted white rice so this person had to serve white rice or make financial sacrifices in other places on the menu. Third, once directors have negotiated with those sharing their warehouse what foods to include in their order, they must also consider what foods they might be able to get more cheaply (than the commodity price plus storage and delivery) locally and what the quality and nutritional value of each food is versus what is available locally. Food service directors must order from the lowest bidder unless that vendor does not meet nutritional guidelines or unless the quality of the product is a known problem.

Third, commodity foods often presented problems for directors concerned about food quality and nutrition. For example, much of the meat that comes from the government has a poor reputation due to recalls such as that which took place in 2008 with beef that had been distributed by the Westland/Hallmark Meat Company and shipped to schools all over the country (Wald 2008). Although these incidents are not common, they contribute to stereotypes about school lunch being comprised of

“mystery meat.” Even the average quality of food can still be problematic for those who are committed to providing nutritious and quality food to students. The directors in Glendale and Jefferson, for example, had both been unhappy with the quality of lunch meats available to them through the commodity program due to the sodium, water, nitrates, and other additives they contained. In other cases, supply shortages can also present problems. For example, directors were unable to purchase fruit that was canned in 100% fruit juice, because there was not enough juice in New York State to meet that demand. Therefore, the canned fruit available to food service directors was packed in syrup instead.

Lakeside’s director explained nutrition concerns related to commodity foods as follows:

Gets tough working with government commodities because many of the items are a higher fat content and yet we’re supposed to be lowering the fat—it’s like, you know, one side of USDA .... And naturally USDA also regulates the government commodity program. It’s like they’re on two different sides of the building and they don’t talk to each other, you know? So this side wants more nutritious, less fat foods, this side is sending us the fatty foods simply because [that’s what they have surpluses of].

### Student preferences

One of the biggest obstacles for food service directors and others who are attempting to change the school food environment is broader U.S. food culture. As one of the directors stated in an interview, “No matter how nutritious school lunch is, it’s not gonna have an impact on ... children. The impact on children is gonna come from the parents and what happens in the household.” Another said,

Parents need to watch what their kids eat. I'm a parent myself. Kids are not gonna eat here what they don't eat at home. If you're not serving this stuff at home, they're not gonna come here and eat it. So how am I supposed to force this food down their throats when they can walk down the street and buy something at [the pizza place nearby] or drive to McDonalds. I can't change their everyday habits. I can just offer it to them and if they're not gonna eat it then I start losing money--the food service program loses money--and we can't do it anymore.

In Glendale, where the food service director preferred to make home-style dishes, parents had called to ask what certain kinds of dishes were and the food service director noted that, even in this rural school district, some students could not recognize sweet potatoes, beets, or even corn on the cob.

Encouraging children to try new and healthier foods was a substantial challenge for food service directors. They felt that they had to serve foods that students would like, and that students would only eat what they were used to from



home and eating out in restaurants. As one person explained, “It’s tough because we walk a very fine line between serving nutritious meals and serving food that children will eat ... They’re used to eating what they see and what they know. If we try a food that they’re not familiar with, usually they won’t try it. Some students will, but the majority of them will not.” Serving new foods was risky, because if students do not buy meals, the food service program does not get reimbursed for them by the federal government. Food service directors repeatedly conveyed the concern that students wouldn’t try or buy foods that were unfamiliar to them. Subsequently, they felt that to reduce the risk of losing money they had to serve the kinds of foods that reformers were trying to remove from schools and to sell as many a la carte items as they could. At Lakeside, chicken nuggets and pizza continued to be offered daily and at Jeffersonville, sausage (“breakfast”) pizza was served every morning.

Even at Longview, where the school prided itself on and had a strong reputation for its alternative lunch program, the school offered pizza bagels as a substitute item every day for students who did not want to purchase the main entrée, and their a la carte options were no healthier than those found in the other schools. Their cook explained, “You know, they say this is an alternative school, so everybody up here is vegetarian. You set pepperoni pizza in front of them and that's what they want. They don't want tofu. Or if you set tofu down in front of them, they're gonna walk down the hill to get pepperoni pizza ... It's not a captive audience for a lot of the kids.”

## Staff

Interviews and observations in cafeterias indicated that a commitment and determination to serving healthy meals to students was essential for making improvements to the school food environment. The food service directors in both Glendale and Jeffersonville had a reputation for caring deeply about the health and nutrition of their students, for working hard to provide healthier options, and for taking risks with trying new things. They also enjoyed cooking in their free time, they had a passion for good food, and their personal food preferences were probably more sophisticated than those found in the average American household. As one interviewee put it, “They’re kinda foodies.”

The food service director for the district serving Lakeside and Longview took a different approach to food service, stating their beliefs that:

One of the worst things that any school food service program can do is to serve a menu that children are not familiar with because what happens is the kids see it, they don’t want it, they’re forced to take it, it ends up in the garbage can. You’ve done that child a greater disservice than if they’d had a hamburger or a hot dog, you know, because there’s no nutrition going into their bodies ... being able to serve children foods that they’ll eat is extremely important. More important to me than serving completely nutritious meals.

This individual also had a reputation for being a very good business person, but one who prioritized business over nutrition. However, it was not only the food service director but also the cafeteria managers, who were the on-site overseers of cafeterias and kitchens and were essential to the change process. The stark contrast between Lakeside and Longview (which are in the same school district) demonstrated how this was the case. Both Lakeside's cafeteria manager and the district's food service directors spoke about their positions almost exclusively from a managerial standpoint; they spoke minimally about nutrition, unless they were specifically asked about it, and they did not take a personal interest in food, cooking, or nutrition outside of what was required for their jobs. In contrast, the school cook at Longview had attended culinary school, enjoyed trying new recipes, and was personally interested in food outside of what was required for the job.

#### Community and School Board Support

In the Glendale School District, a critical way around the labor cost obstacle was through the support of the school board, which started paying the family portion of insurance premiums when the new food service director came on board. NSLP guidelines limit the degree to which school boards can financially support lunch programs, but one of the ways they can do so is through assistance with insurance costs for family members, so when the lunch program was operating at a deficit that happened to equal the cost of this benefit, the school board agreed to start covering this cost.

At Longview, the food service program had been able to circumvent labor costs almost altogether by having students play a central role in preparing and serving food to fellow students. Only one paid staff member, the school cook, worked in the kitchen, and the students were also advised by a small team of teachers and aides who volunteered as advisors. With the money that was freed from labor costs, the school was able to afford higher quality food from vendors of their own choosing, rather than the normally requisite lowest bidder.

In Glendale, where the food service director had been in the position for three years when I began this research, there was speculation by people in the district that the previous food service director left the position when the community started to request that healthier food be served at lunch. The director did not support the changes being demanded of the program and moved to another district to be able to continue serving the same kinds of food traditionally served in Glendale.

#### School size and culture

The three schools in this study with the healthiest lunch options were a fraction of Lakeside's size, which had the most traditional menu for students and had a student population of over 1500 students. In Jeffersonville and Glendale, where the student population was approximately 500 at each school, the food service directors were able to make regular visits to their cafeterias and students knew them by name. These individuals had been able to do food demonstrations with new foods, such as hummus, and they believed this helped students experiment with new foods more easily. The directors in these districts felt that personal connections with both students and staff

made change happen more easily. In contrast, the director serving Lakeside and Longview had a greater number of schools and students to serve and did not have time to make these kinds of visits and connections.

The most alternative food choices were found at Longview, where the school culture was intentionally different from that of the other three schools and the student population was around 300 students. As described further in chapter six, the school's philosophy was based on a democratic and participatory model of education. The student population is also substantially smaller than at the other schools. As the school cook explained regarding what made their model work:

Partially we're a smaller school, so we don't need a lot--we don't need the produce on a large scale. And that we have the community of students and family groups and committees that are able to grow the foods. Because we don't grow it actually, the [cafeteria] itself is not the one who takes care of the produce. So without the other students doing that we wouldn't be able to grow our own vegetables.

And:

It requires the students' ability to work here in the kitchen. Like Michael here works in here 4th period and he used to come in before school and he used to work lunch and right after lunch. So that's a lot for a student. So it depends on their schedules. And if we had a bigger

school, the amount of food you'd have to cook you wouldn't be able to do it with just one person like myself ... I think when you get into 1000s of students in a school it's probably too much for a student group.

While the large size of a school district could be constraining, it could also be an advantage because of how food was procured. As mentioned earlier, food service directors in smaller school districts had to coordinate their food purchases with other directors and therefore had to rely on members of their buying group to order healthier alternatives. If other directors did not want to purchase brown rice, for example, it was more difficult and more expensive to order the quantity needed for a small school like Jeffersonville or Glendale.

### ***Conclusion***

In summary, the expectations that stakeholders had for food service directors both converged and diverged in critical places. Traditionally, as long as nutrition programs have remained financially self-sustaining from year to year, administrators have been content to give directors a great deal of autonomy. The rise in district concern about and intervention in food service programs has coincided with the rise in public concern about childhood obesity, but also with the rising cost of program operations, which has resulted in lost revenues and programs operating at a loss.

With programs becoming more dependent on financial support from school boards, and with the federal government requiring community participation in creating local wellness policies, food service directors are now answering to a more diverse and more demanding audience than ever.

In the communities examined in this research, Wellness Policy Committee members wanted more than symbolic change; they wanted changes for which they perceived the need to be common sense. Students, teachers, and even parents were mixed in their expectations for school food reform and, perhaps surprisingly, were sometimes more concerned about the personal freedom of consumers in cafeterias than they were with schools serving healthier foods. As I expound upon in chapter six, much of the resistance on the part of students was due to how the term “healthy” was operationalized in reform, i.e. it did not mean fresher and higher quality fruits and vegetables offered on expanded salad bars (for which many students indicated a preference); instead “healthy” food was whole grain pasta and bread and brown rice. That kind of reform was unpopular not only for students, but also for the teachers who purchased cafeteria meals themselves. If these changes were not popular among students, food service staff did not support them either. And complicating matters further, neither did other food service directors in the buying groups that programs from smaller districts participated in, thus making procurement of healthier alternatives more complicated. Similarly, the USDA sent mixed messages to directors through the commodities program that offered low-cost agricultural surpluses that did not meet the nutritional or quality criteria of School Wellness Policies.

In this chapter I have illustrated how the structure of school food service, as it is reproduced and imbued with meaning through daily interactions between actors, and attempts to reform it have created role conflict and ambiguity for the food service directors who shoulder the vast majority of responsibility in that process. Given what role theory literature says about the individual and organizational consequences of role conflict and ambiguity, it is not surprising that school food reformers were dissatisfied with the progress that the most constrained food service directors were making, or that directors themselves were frustrated and alienated in the process. This chapter provides empirical evidence for the claim that for structural reforms such as that taking place with school food to be successful, food service directors need to have greater role coherence, and rather than role accretion, the creation of new roles in the system to support expected changes (Lounsbury 2001).

However, the structure of school food programs was not only constraining; it was also enabling for the agentic individuals who were able to realize some degree of change. Perhaps the most telling of how this was so was in the case of the food service director for both the Longview and Lakeside schools. These two schools had the most progressive and the most traditional food service programs respectively, yet they were overseen by the same food service director. Whereas the size, community support, on-site staffing, sourcing logistics, and financing structures were constraining at Lakeside, they were enabling at Longview. This school had a small student body; a self-selecting community of progressive students, teachers and parents; a cook who was willing to take on greater responsibility for the program so that it could operate



autonomously from the rest of the district; students who provided free labor; and food that was sourced locally and from the school itself.

While the work that food service directors do in carrying out reform occurs primarily behind the scenes, in the next chapter I examine the next layer of actors who serve in many ways as the face of reform. In particular, I analyze how the “lunch ladies” who cooked and served school meals every day were enabled and constrained in their dual roles as “moms of the school” and food service workers and draw out implications of this dynamic for reform.

## CHAPTER 5

### CAFETERIA WORKER OR LUNCH LADY?: THE MEANING OF TECHNICAL VERSUS EMOTIONAL LABOR IN THE CHANGING SCHOOL FOOD ENVIRONMENT

In his book, *Asylums*, Goffman (1961) writes, “The simplest sociological view of the individual and his self is that he is to himself what his place in an organization defines him to be ... Perhaps we should further complicate the construct ... initially defining the individual as a stance-taking entity, a something that takes up a position somewhere between identification with an organization and opposition to it” (p. 319-320). As school food reform efforts make their way through cafeterias around the country, this quote gives the movement some critical food for thought. The applicability of Goffman’s statement to an ironically invisible set of actors in the change process is uncanny. As school food service programs in particular face increasing pressure to serve healthier foods to children, the staff who are literally and figuratively at the front lines of this change receive little mention for the important role they can play in this process (Pateman et al. 1995, Levine et al. 2002, Cho & Nadow 2004, Poppendieck 2010). While reform traditionally focuses on food served “on the line” in cafeterias, it has paid little attention to the people behind that line; while it emphasizes the food that ends up on students’ lunch trays it overlooks the individuals who put it there every day. The attention that is paid to food service staff tends to focus on their lack of cooking skills and reliance on prepackaged foods to

feed students. This discourse often implies an individual failing on the part of food service staff rather than a symptom of larger structural problems.

On one hand, it should not be surprising that this set of actors is overlooked given traditional attitudes toward and appreciation of service work in our culture. On the other hand, it is nevertheless unexpected because these actors are literally the faces of change in the school food environment. Nevertheless, for the most part they are characterized according to the one-dimensional popular stereotype: women in hairnets perfunctorily scooping food onto plastic lunch trays as students move through the lunch line. School cafeteria workers have had songs written about them and even dolls made in their likeness, all of which ascribe to them a superficial role defined exclusively by their occupational positions. As Goffman (1961) suggests, this simplistic construct requires a more complicated understanding.

In this chapter, I analyze how the structure of school food service simultaneously enabled and constrained workers in their roles vis-à-vis students. In so doing, I describe the role conflict that resulted from the technical and “emotional” labor (Hochschild 1983) that school cafeteria workers performed. Contrary to traditional arguments that emotional labor is degrading, damaging, and identity-eroding to service workers, I suggest that due to the unique position cafeteria workers in this study occupied, the emotional labor they performed for students was instead rewarding and identity-affirming. However, the technical labor they performed for employers was less-so. Therefore, when food service programs attempted to make the school food environment healthier in ways that students did not support, school food service staff were more inclined, either implicitly or explicitly, to ally themselves with

students and maintain the status quo. In combination, these interactions illuminate how the role that food service staff play in high school cafeterias, and the attitudes and perceptions these actors have regarding this role, contribute to maintaining and sustaining the traditional structure of food service programs.

### ***The technical labor: cook, server, cashier***

Organizationally speaking, cafeteria staff members occupy a critical position in the maintenance or modification of school food programs. Cafeteria staff have been cited as critical to the success of school food reform, as their often taken-for-granted work performing what is assumed to be simple and routine labor can in reality have a substantial impact on the school food environment (Pateman et al. 1995, Levine et al. 2002, Cho & Nadow, 2004). Cafeteria workers' willingness (or lack thereof) to demonstrate outward support and positive attitudes toward change, place new foods strategically on "the line," or enthusiastically encourage students to try new dishes are just a few of the ways in which cafeteria staff can either constrain or enable attempts to change food service programs. In the simplest of terms, the technical aspects of cafeteria work entail cooking food, serving students, and taking payment for food, each task appropriately and respectively given the titles cook, server, and cashier. Among each of the schools in this study, the cooks I spoke with and observed had varying degrees of responsibilities. At Lakeside and Glendale<sup>11</sup>, the cook's work was relegated almost exclusively to "heat and serve" items (those that come prepackaged and frozen), as most entrees made from scratch are shuttled from a central kitchen

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<sup>11</sup> I use pseudonyms throughout for schools and individuals.

located elsewhere in the district. At Longview and Jeffersonville, the school's cooks were responsible for all meal preparation, whether simple "heat and serve" (which is virtually nonexistent at Longview and about 70% of meals at Jeffersonville) or "from scratch." Only at Longview is the cook professionally trained in culinary arts. An alum of the school, the cook began training as a member of the student kitchen crew as a student himself. After high school this individual attended culinary school and at the time that this research was conducted the school cook also worked as a chef at a local restaurant during the evenings.

From the start of their shifts at 6 a.m. until breakfast, which typically began at 8:15 and lasted an average of 30 minutes, the responsibilities of food servers and cashiers overlapped. They set up their stations, assisted with food preparation, and worked together with the cooks to make sure the cafeteria was ready to start serving the morning meal. Between breakfast and lunch, the staff cleaned up from breakfast, took a 20 minute break, then started preparing for lunch, the first period of which began at 10:40 in the three schools with multiple lunch periods. At every school except Jeffersonville (where lunch participation was low but breakfast activity was high due to its scheduling between morning classes) lunch was by far the busiest time of the day in the cafeterias, as many more students ate lunch than breakfast at school and there were many more options for students to choose from. While breakfast tended to be repetitive from day to day—typically breakfast pizzas or sandwiches, a selection of cold cereals, bagels, muffins, and cinnamon roles—and allowed for quicker and more simple exchanges between the staff and students, at lunch it usually took students longer to order their food, staff needed more time to retrieve the items in

their orders, and this in combination with the numbers of students in line often resulted in long lines and an intense two hours or more of work for the women behind the line. During each lunch period, food servers took orders, retrieved food items to place on trays, and handed students the foods they ordered. They also refilled foods when they ran low, regularly checked food temperatures (food safety protocol), and updated signs in the cafeteria when advertised items ran out for the day. Cashiers rang up orders and reminded students when their accounts were running low or when they owed money on their accounts.<sup>12</sup> At Lakeview, which had the most lunch periods, the last lunch period ended at 1:52. Eight minutes later, the work day was over for the food service staff. They started closing down their lines at around 1:30, as the last lunch had the fewest students and the staff needed the extra time for cleaning up the kitchen, breaking down their stations, and getting equipment back in its place for the next day.

The roles described above were defined by the job descriptions that staff member have, each requiring the kind of division of labor and routine, unskilled work that reduces costs and increases output, while centralizing decision making with managers (in this case, foods service directors). Considering the importance of food service staff in supporting nutritional objectives of the food service program, it is striking that these positions neither required professional training nor offered regular professional development opportunities. In their role as service workers, cafeteria staff were non-specialized workers who were easily replaceable, and the more training required or offered, the harder they would be to replace. Such a situation reduced

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<sup>12</sup> Failure to pay for meals was a problem at every school in this study. See Steines (2009) for a discussion of this trend nationwide and the dilemma it creates for students and school nutrition programs.

financial costs (although labor costs nevertheless constituted over half of a food program's budgets), but it came with other costs. One of these consequences was that School Nutrition Programs in these schools were not staffed by nutrition professionals. Staff, managers, and directors had access to resources developed by such professionals through, for example, USDA's "Team Nutrition" and the School Nutrition Association (the national association of school food service professionals). However, cafeteria staff were also free to choose the degree they wanted to take advantage of these opportunities.

### ***The Concept of Emotional Labor***

In contrast to the technical labor that food service staff performed in the schools, Hochschild (1983) describes service occupations as also involving "emotional labor," wherein workers manage their feelings in response to organizational demands to create a particular emotional state in others, particularly affirmation and a sense of well-being. The three characteristics of jobs involving this kind of labor are that they involve voice or facial contact with the public, they require workers to produce an emotional state in their clients or customers, and they provide employers with an opportunity to exert some control over the emotional activities of workers. The primary emotional task for those who perform emotional labor is to publicly present themselves in a manner that might not be consistent with how they privately feel (Wharton 1993).

Research suggests that routinized service work, especially that which is referred to as "frontline" (Wharton 2009), "interactive" (Leidner 1993) or "customer"

work (Troyer, Mueller, and Osinsky 2000), presents challenges to individualism, authenticity, and allegiances (i.e. customer vs. organization). Although Hochschild (1983) recognized that employees in certain kinds of jobs will be more prone to psychological consequences than others, the concept of emotional labor nevertheless rests on assumptions about the negative outcomes of such work (Godwyn 2006). Sociological studies of service work have largely reinforced these assumptions, often depicting service jobs as demeaning and implying that they entail inauthenticity that undermines or challenges the self-respect and personal integrity of service workers (Ehrenreich 2001; Hochschild 1983; Leidner 1993; Wharton 1993)

The focus on negative outcomes of emotional labor has, however, been challenged by those who argue for a more nuanced understanding of service work, and who challenge traditional assumptions about such work (Godwyn 2006; Wouters 1989). For example, Wouters (1989) suggests that “Hochschild’s preoccupation with the ‘costs’ of emotional labor not only leads to a one-sided and moralistic interpretation of ... working conditions ... it also hampers understanding of the joy the job may bring” (p. 116).

Responses such as these to the concept of emotional labor indicate a need to better understand the factors that can mediate the negative effects of emotional labor, and to recognize that the outcomes of employment in a job entailing emotional labor are not uniformly negative (Wharton, 1993). Indeed, studies that support the idea of emotional labor as psychologically stress-inducing tend to focus on workers who have certain variables of their jobs in common, such as high routinization, little autonomy, and little to no opportunity to initiate or modify organizational policies. As Godwyn



(2006) suggests, these kind of studies fail “to illuminate the full range of service industries and the range of interactions between employees and customer and between employees and management” (p. 488). In sum, emotional labor in the workplace does not necessarily have the same alienating quality and exploitive consequences that Hochschild and others suggest.

In this chapter, I highlight the conditions that contributed to making service work emotionally rewarding and identity affirming, rather than “psychologically damaging,” for the food service staff in this study. In so doing, I suggest that cafeteria staff in this study constituted a unique kind of service worker performing a distinct kind of emotional labor: that which was characterized by a relatively low level of routinization; allowed greater autonomy, creativity, and authenticity for the individual worker; and was based on on-going relationships, rather than one-time encounters, with customers who occupied a similar status within schools. I also discuss the implications of the gendered nature of “lunch lady” work. I conclude by analyzing how the convergence of the above dynamics constrained school food reform efforts while also demonstrating potential to enable this reform.

### ***Emotional labor in the high school cafeteria: “Moms” of the school***

In contrast to the routine aspects of cafeteria work, the “emotional labor” (Hochschild 1983) staff performed with students was the most rewarding aspect of their employment for the majority of workers I interviewed and observed.<sup>13</sup> In the words of Leona, the cashier at Lakeside, “I think I speak for everybody, the kids are

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<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the two staff members I interviewed who enjoy the technical aspects of their job the most were less popular among the students I interviewed.

the best part of the job.” The “lunch ladies” (as both they and others called them) saw themselves in a nurturing role that they took great pride and found much fulfillment in. As one food service director stated, cafeteria staff are seen by many students as being the “moms of the school.” They enjoyed their work immensely, particularly when interacting with students: chatting with them as they walk through the line, watching them mature from freshman to senior year; even cheering them on at athletic events and chaperoning school dances. Lunch ladies provided students with a unique kind of service not found elsewhere in the school. Unlike teachers, who by the nature of their positions must place demands for their students, lunch ladies felt that their job was to serve students with few expectations in return.

Despite assumptions about the simplicity and routine nature of cafeteria work, food service staff played a critical and often under-appreciated role in the schools that employed them. Because they see the same students every day for four years, they are able know these students in a way that teachers sometimes do not. Indeed, students and alumni of the schools sometimes mentioned having closer relationships with the lunch ladies than they had with some of their teachers. The implications of this kind of relationship was evidenced at Glendale, where cafeteria workers had noticed that a student who appeared increasingly withdrawn and exhibited other concerning behaviors as the school year went on, a change that seemed to have gone unnoticed by his teachers. After agreeing among themselves that the student needed help, they alerted a school counselor. The counselor was able to intervene and help the student, who was eventually diagnosed with depression.

The above is an extreme example of the important role that cafeteria staff play beyond the routine service work they perform. However, staff had other, more light-hearted stories to tell of the warm relationships they have with certain students. A server at Glendale named Christine told me about a time she was at the drive-thru at McDonalds and noticed one of her students in the car behind her with a friend. She asked the cashier at the window how much the meals in the car behind her totaled, and seeing that she had enough extra money in her purse she asked the cashier to tell the next car that the meal was “on their favorite lunch lady.” The next day, the student was excited to see her and thank her (he clearly knew who is favorite lunch lady was), joking that he should’ve ordered something more expensive.

Christine was indeed a favorite. Toward the end of the school year, students had spontaneously started writing nice messages to her on a piece of paper in the cafeteria, so she taped it to her station. The next day it was completely covered in messages to and about her, such as “Christine makes a mean wrap!” and “She’s the best lunch lady ever!” Although the overwhelming affection for her was clear, Christine insisted that the same kinds of comments would appear if any other lunch lady were to tape up a blank sheet of paper at her station.

One of the favorite lunch ladies at Lakeside was a cashier named Leona, who had been at the school for nearly twenty years at the time I conducted my research. She, like everyone one else I observed, referred to students for the most part either by their first names, or by terms of endearment, such as “honey,” “dear” or “sweetheart.” The kind of relationship she had with students was well illustrated in two examples in particular. The first occurred when a student in line ordered a “blue” Gatorade

(students regularly ordered these drinks by color rather than flavor). After handing the student his drink, Leona asked, “What flavor is that anyway?” The student replied that he didn’t know, so she asked if she could try it. He casually handed it back to her and she opened it and took a drink. Although not all food staff would be as comfortable asking to taste a student’s drink as Leona was in that situation, the exchange captured quite well a feeling of not only easy interaction among staff and students, but also how relationships can start to approach a friendship in some cases.

The most touching exchange between Leona and another student came in the spring of 2008. It was senior week at the high school, a time when daily events are planned for graduating seniors, such as a casino night, a senior trip and a special breakfast served by the parents. One day during the week, a senior came through the line and Leona asked him if he was going to casino night. When he said he wasn’t, Leona asked him why. He said his parents couldn’t afford it—it cost each student \$5 to participate in the week’s events, and he didn’t have the money. Leona got an immediate look of concern on her face and said in a hushed voice so other students in the line wouldn’t hear: “Gee, can I lend ya five bucks?” The student declined, saying that he was about to get paid from his job the next day and would participate in other activities later in the week, and that he didn’t really want to go to casino night anyway.

These exchanges were not exclusive to Leona and the students in her line. For example, for a time at Lakeside the cafeteria was unable to regularly offer grape juice as a selection along with orange and apple juice (which counts as one of the three sides in a full meal). It started to appear again sporadically in the cafeteria, and the first time it was offered again it ran out quickly in the first few lunch periods. Julie,

one of the servers, knew that the absence of grape juice had been particularly disappointing for a few students who didn't eat until the fourth lunch period, so she saved some for them and when they arrived at the front of the line she was excited to display what she had saved just for them. When the students saw the juice, they dropped their jaws in surprise and excitement, as though they were being given a rare and extravagant gift. Indeed, it was surprising to see how excited students could become about their favorite food items, especially when they had become hard to come by or when staff had gone out of their way to make the items available to them.

The overwhelming majority of exchanges I observed between staff and students were characterized by warmth, affectionate, or at the very least, respect. There was the occasional students who was rude or condescending to staff, but such exchanges were rare. And even these involved, for the most part, students who would eventually mature and come to at least respect the women who served their meals. As Lakeside staff explained:

June: Well, you want to wring their necks sometimes [laughter].

Leona: In the years I've worked here there's probably two, maybe three students I've been very happy to see graduate. [laughter from everyone.] I can't imagine working your whole life here and never having a student that really aggravates you. And you'd love to say "go to another line."

June: What's nice is when you see someone grow up, you know that they mature and grow up/<sup>14</sup>

Alice: That's what I was gonna say, seeing them become young adults/

Julie: Now that's one thing I have noticed between like the 9th and 12th grade some of them change *so* drastically/

June: From year to year the difference is amazing.

Leona: With boys especially. They come in like they want to prove themselves. They come in all tough and nasty and mean and it's like then by the time they get to their senior year they turn into a nice young man.

When I spoke with students in focus groups about their relationships with the staff, their perspective matched those shared above. As we switched from the topic of food to the topic of those who served it to them, the tone in students' voices often changed noticeably from dissatisfaction to effusive affection. Students who purchased their lunch on a regular basis or bought a la carte items on the line spoke about the "lunch ladies" in both general terms and with specific examples. General responses about

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<sup>14</sup> A "/" indicates where one participant was interrupted by another.

cafeteria staff included comments such as “they’re always just so nice and happy,” and “they take care of you,” to more specific remarks, such as the following:

Megan: Leona and I are tight. I've seen her every day for the past four years. It's just the coolest thing, you know lunch ladies come and go [students laugh], but Leona's always there.

Greg: When I was in middle school and I ate lunch I guess every day, I told one of the lunch ladies I was vegetarian, and pretty much every day--cause there wasn't that much vegetarian food served and I had the last lunch period--she would set aside a vegetarian something for me. That was really cool, so I always had something I could eat.

One of the subtle ways in which students at Lakeside indicate allegiance to and affection for particular cafeteria staff is by referring to them as “my” lunch lady. At this school, there are three lunch lines in the cafeteria that all serve the same food but are staffed by the same people everyday, so one of the ways in which students choose a line is based on the staff person they know or like best. In interviews, some students referred to whomever this person is as “my lunch lady,” such as in the following example:

Joe: My lunch lady, Alice, she ran out of potato soup and I was like ...  
"Aw, that's my favorite!" So halfway through the lunch period she

comes out and brings me a cup of soup. So, I mean, the lunch ladies are really pretty good people.

Gutek (2000) suggest that customers referring to service providers in possessive terms (e.g. “my cleaning lady,” “my hairstylist,” or “my doctor”) connotes an element of servitude in such relationships. However, in this case, the students’ “lunch ladies” also refer to the students as “my kids,” as indicated in the following focus group discussion among workers about the role they play in students’ lives:

June: I think we probably make it pleasant for them. And they love it when we know them and ask them how their day is, when you know what they like. They absolutely love that. And they like to come to the same line every day because they like to see your face. If you're not there one day they'll say "Where were you? We missed you!" or something like that.

Stephanie: And like, they're all your kids.

Alice: Yeah

June: Yeah, absolutely. Cause you even call 'em your kids. You talk about the kids in your line as "these my kids," you know, they come to my line every day lookin' for me.



### ***The School Cafeteria as a Unique Site for Emotional Labor***

As previously mentioned, the purposes of this chapter are to understand conditions under which service work can contradict assumptions about its negative impact on workers, to examine how the positive effects of emotional labor on cafeteria staff may currently constrain efforts to reform school food, and to explore how the benefits of this dynamic might instead enable effective change in the school food environment. In this section, I address the first of these purposes and argue that school cafeteria work constitutes a unique category of service work that challenges traditional perceptions of emotional labor's consequences for four main reasons. First, although the work is routinized, it is to a much lesser degree than in the environments where interactive service work has traditionally been studied. Second, worker/customer interactions are based on relationships rather than encounters (Gutek 1995). Third, employees have greater autonomy in carrying out their work, because school lunch programs have relatively secure customer demand (Leidner 1999). Fourth, the power differential between employee and customer is reduced in schools, where students and cafeteria workers occupy a similar (i.e. low power) social status.

#### **Routinization**

Although cafeteria work is in fact routine and fits the criteria of emotional service work, the degree to which this was so was relatively low in the high schools I observed. To illustrate how this was so, consider the following excerpt from Leidner (1993), whose work at McDonald's epitomized routinization. She gives the example

of a promotion of Bacon Double Cheeseburgers, when the window staff were directed to suggest that product to every customer, and describes the outcome as follows:

Since it was summertime, when many customers stopped in just for a cold drink or an ice cream cone, the managers soon recognized that it was ridiculous for workers to respond to such orders by asking, “Would you like to try our Bacon Double Cheeseburger?” The solution they provided was for workers to ask this question *before* the customer gave the order. Customers, unfortunately, were likely to respond to a hurriedly delivered “Hi-welcome-to-McDonald’s-would-you-like-to-try-our-Bacon-Double-Cheeseburger?” with a baffled “What?” Nevertheless, this practice was enforced, the goal of actual communication having been abandoned. (Leidner, 1993: 185)

In contrast, the exchanges between staff and students—although necessarily brief due to the need to keep students moving through the line—did constitute something much closer to “actual communication.” For example, employees were not required to use formulaic scripts or required to wear uniforms (or even the infamous hairnets of popular stereotypes). Instead, staff were given a great deal of freedom as to how they took and filled orders, a style that varied depending on the personality of the worker. Shy or introverted workers tended not to talk as much with the students, but were still friendly and would ask questions such as, “What can I get for ya, hon?” or “What’s it gonna be for ya today?” The workers who seemed to take the role of

“mom of the school” to heart the most would ask students about, for example, how they did at a recent sporting event, how their weekend was, or where they’d been if the student had been absent for a few days. The most outgoing staff member worked at Jeffersonville, and her style of interaction with students was to joke loudly with the students and give them a hard time as they went through her line. The students loved her.

The closest resemblance to a script that all of these cafeteria staff followed, regardless of their personality, was to remind students that they could order more sides if they had not ordered a full meal, but they were not required to force these on students. Overall, while it was true that cafeteria work encompassed the directive to act friendly, my observations led me to conclude, as Godwyn’s (2006) did in her research on service workers in upscale establishments, that the cafeteria staff in this study genuinely enjoyed their work and derived a sense of satisfaction and self-respect from it. The cheerful disposition staff had with students tended to carry over into breaks and other times when students weren’t around and when staff members had opportunities to talk among themselves. Interesting to note as well is that cafeteria staff were not directly observed by food service directors, who do not supervise workers directly on the job and whose offices were often not located in the same building as the schools I observed. Each cafeteria did have a manager or head cook, but I did not observe staff act any differently whether or not these staff members were present.

### Relationships versus encounters

One of the reasons why genuine communication occurred between students and lunch ladies—and why these women enjoyed their jobs so much—may have to do with the differences that Gutek (1995) identifies between relationships and encounters in service work. Workers who provide services through relationships see the same customers regularly over an extended period of time, which gives them incentive to invest emotionally in their relationships with customers and provides them with knowledge that helps them customize their “emotional labor.” Individuals in these jobs include hairdressers, mechanics, and receptionists. Those who serve clients through mere encounters are unlikely to foster this kind of customer orientation, and so their focus is instead on speed, efficiency, and uniformity. Gas station attendants and fast food workers, for example, generally do not have a regular clientele and therefore less incentive to invest in the people with whom they come into contact. Drawing on this distinction, I suggest that the second reason why school cafeteria work challenges demeaning depictions of emotional labor and service work is that, as Leidner (1999) suggests, service workers whose interactions are based on relationships rather than encounters are less likely to have their emotional labor closely regulated by supervisors. Less stringent supervision coupled with the more rewarding nature of relationships over simple encounters lent itself to increased job satisfaction.

One of the advantages of a service relationship over a mere encounter is that both customer and provider are more likely to accommodate each other’s interests and needs (Gutek 1995). This means that providers in service relationships are not required to treat all customers uniformly. In the cafeterias I observed, while all

students were treated fairly as they moved through the lunch line, it was clear that some students were closer to the staff than others, and that this was generally based on the degree of interaction a student wished to pursue with staff. With the few exceptions when a student was rude, for the most part students either treated the relationship with staff perfunctorily (the line was just another routine in their day), personably (greeting and ordering with a smile, then moving on), or familiarly (greeting by name and chatting or joking during the interaction). The staff tailored the service they provided to the student's level of involvement in the relationship (and students likewise tailored their degree of involvement to the staff member—some were more extraverted and enjoyed the interactions more than others), thus giving them another aspect of their job over which they were able to exert autonomy and self-expression.

It is important to consider that one of the outcomes of relationship-based service interactions can be the creation of loyal customers who serve as “advocates for the providers by promoting the service and possibly even defending it against critics” (Guttek et al. 2000: 323). While the majority of students were not exactly advocates of the food served in school, they were quick to defend cafeteria staff in interviews or to make clear that they did not consider staff responsible for the food options in school. Even when students complained about food, they were likely to give reasons why the food wasn't better (mainly citing budgets and the number of students served every day), serving as a kind of defense for the status quo.

### Relatively secure demand

School cafeteria staff were not as rigidly managed by food service directors and managers as they often are in private, for-profit establishments. The success of food service programs does not depend on the quality of interactions between staff and students, as they are more or less assured steady demand regardless of the quality of customer service. Although school food service programs in this study operated with growing deficits, and it was still to the program's advantage to have as many customers as possible, the dynamic was nevertheless different from the kinds of highly routinized and impersonalized work found at, for example, a typical fast food restaurant (Leidner 1993). In some schools this may result in situations where students are treated rudely or indifferently by staff members.<sup>15</sup> Even in the high schools I observed where student/customer staff interactions were overwhelmingly positive, the quality of the experience for consumers is relatively low with respect to, for example, food quality and the long wait students experience in lunch lines. Simply stated, although school nutrition programs are struggling financially, the benefits of investing in quality customer service is ultimately not worth the costs. Inferior food quality and long waits in cafeteria lines are evidence of this and suggest that the high degree of customer service offered by cafeteria workers is something that is not strictly enforced by management, but rather something workers choose to provide for other reasons.

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<sup>15</sup> My research suggests this might be the case particularly in elementary schools, for example, perhaps because as students mature the relationships become more meaningful and thus more rewarding.

### Reduced status differential/shared status

Much of what is perceived to reduce job satisfaction in service work and depict it as “demeaning” is the status differential between employee and customer. The employee is considered to be in service to the customer, often in cases where the latter has a higher level of income, education, or occupational prestige. With students and cafeteria staff, however, the status differential was greatly reduced because both parties ultimately held a relatively low status, either socioeconomically<sup>16</sup> and/or in the school itself. What is more, cafeteria staff had the added advantage of being older—in many cases much older—than students, and therefore have this edge of status over students. The status-equalizing effect of these dynamics not only seemed to open up the possibility for more authentic relationships between students and staff (see also Godwyn, 2006), but it is possible that it was further reinforced by their shared subordinate positions vis-à-vis food in the schools (i.e. staff had little say in what they served students, who had little say in what they were served by staff).

### Gender and emotional labor

Hochschild (1983) suggests that jobs requiring emotional labor are more likely to be held by women than by men, in part reflecting long-held stereotypes about which gender is best suited for a particular kind of job (DeVault 1991; West 1987; Wharton 2009). This held true for the food service staff in this study (not including directors and on-site managers): with the exception of two kitchen assistants at Lakeside, all of

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<sup>16</sup> Most students who purchased lunch at the schools I observed were on free and reduced lunch.

the staff were female. Furthermore, workers in the roles held by men had little to no interaction with students, while the servers and cashiers at the front were all women.<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, Wharton (1993) found that women were significantly more satisfied than their male counterparts engaged in emotion work. Wharton (1993) suggests that women's socialization may make them better equipped than men for the interpersonal demands of frontline service work and more likely to derive more satisfaction out of interactive service join. Women are more likely than men to value "working with people" and to seek out roles requiring empathy and attentiveness to others, and they also experience these jobs more positively than their male counterparts (Wharton, 1993: 225)

Yet, as Leidner (1993) notes, "one of the more important determinants of the meaning of a type of work, as well as of how that work is conducted and rewarded, is its association with a particular gender" (p. 194). I observed two outcomes in particular of the feminized role that "lunch ladies" played in school: first, these roles were not highly valued by the system of which they were a part, resulting in work roles that were low-skilled and did not involve regular professional development opportunities. And second, the emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) that staff performed created for them a rewarding nurturing role as "moms" of the schools where they work. The result of this dynamic, as I explain in the section below, was that cafeteria staff were better equipped and had greater incentive to provide emotional

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<sup>17</sup> In Leidner's (1993) account of her time doing service work at a McDonalds restaurant, she describes a similar division of labor, with men in the back grilling hamburgers and women up front handling customers. She suggests that cooking presents fewer challenges to masculinity than serving customers, which entails adopting an ingratiating manner, taking orders from a wider range of people, and keeping quiet when insulted. From a gender perspective, then, it should not be surprising that cafeteria staff, particularly those on the front lines, have traditionally been women since the inception of school nutrition programs.



nurturing to students than they were to provide “nutritional nurturing,” so when the two were in conflict, nutrition became a lower priority.

### ***Emotional Labor and Role Resistance***

The relationships between cafeteria staff and students were indeed endearing to witness. The cafeteria can be a place where students find not only food to fuel them through the day, but also a nurturing and caring person to serve it to them who knows their names, knows their favorite foods, and sometimes has their food ready for them even before they reach the front of the line. What are the implications of this kind of relationship in the lives of students? How can it facilitate or be at odds with the change process in schools?

I argue that although lunch ladies can play an important part in making changes in the cafeteria a success, the emotional role that they fill and the lack of a professional role they are given in their jobs contributes to maintaining the traditional structure of school food. The combination of these two factors results in a situation where food service workers are reluctant to be agents for a change they do not consider necessary in the first place. Furthermore, this change is being advocated for by a movement that maligns workers in discourses that place the burden of structural inadequacies on the shoulders of individuals. As a result, in their technical roles, the staff may not see a need for change, and in their emotional roles, they are resistant to being the face of that change.

When discussions around changing school food focus on food service staff, an assumption seems to be that the need for change is self-evident. In reality, however,

this was not always the case. Food service workers I spoke with and observed for this research had differing positions on the food served in their school, depending on what the food options were like where they worked. The greatest outward opposition toward change occurred at Glendale, where drastic changes had recently taken place following a tumultuous resignation of the previous food service director. Prior to the new director's arrival, calzones, French fries and ice cream were available daily in the cafeteria, most foods were heat-and-serve, and overall the menu was described by many people I spoke with as essentially "very fast-food." And for many of those people, the description of "fast food" was not problematic. In addition to the students, many faculty members enjoyed having these options available to them (about half of those I spoke with) and even some parents—including one school board member—preferred the old menus because they gave students what they wanted. From the perspective of parents who opposed the changes, it wasn't the school's job to regulate what their children ate or to force them to eat foods they find less appealing.

The cafeteria staff I spoke with and observed also preferred the old cafeteria menus and options. They didn't always understand the push for change that others saw as so necessary and tended either to think that the changes they were already making were adequate (or more than adequate), or they believed that the food choices were as healthy as they could be given the constraints of tight budgets and student preferences for less-healthy food. They thought that students should be allowed to eat what they like and that it was unnecessary and unfair to the students to make the kinds of changes that the school board had dictated. As Christine at Glendale stated:

You know, people got down on the pizza, but you can make pizza healthy and if you have a wrap that's a tortilla and lots of cheese and olives and lettuce, which is what some students have, nutritionally that's pretty much the same thing as pizza. Pizza's bread, some sauce, cheese, and some vegetables, and if a student were to melt that and make it hot, would it suddenly seem less healthy?

In the other two schools with paid cafeteria staff, the women I spoke with were equally inclined to support the status quo, but they were located in schools that were undergoing less dramatic change than at Glendale. The main indication of their support for the status quo was the way they spoke about the food being served, in particular how they gave as examples of “healthy” foods those that were some of the most problematic for their critics. The following discussion of one day’s breakfast and lunch by the cook at Jeffersonville provides a telling example:

Interviewer: How did the breakfast pizza go over today for lunch?

Cook: Well, it went out--and then it went into the garbage can, piece after piece after piece. They read "breakfast pizza" and they thought they'd get what they get for breakfast [every day]. They like it, and it would go, but once they got it and found out what it was they wouldn't eat it.

Interviewer: How was it different?

Cook: Regular breakfast pizza has red sauce, sausage, cheese. This had white gravy, egg and bacon or egg and sausage cooked together, and then cheese on top. So it was totally different, I mean night and day. I myself, I found making it unattractive. I thought it's not really what I would want myself, but I said before that I'd try it. After I baked it, it looked fine, really appetizing looking. Smelled wonderful, I thought I'd have to change my mind because it really looks and smells very, very good. If they'd been willing to even try it, they might've found that they liked it. If they wanted something, I can tweak it in any number of places, I can put different things on it, whatever they want. But they really weren't accepting of it, like I said they want the status quo. When they saw "breakfast pizza" they didn't read beyond the word "breakfast pizza" and that's what they wanted. So when they realized what it actually was, they were just, "no." So most of our lunch today ended up in a compost container, unfortunately.

Although the cook's words in this exchange indicate that she thought she was providing an alternative to the status quo, the pizza recipe (with the exception of its whole wheat crust, not mentioned above) is precisely the kind of food that critics of the lunch program were responding to with their calls for change. In a similar scene at Lakeview, I asked the cashier, Leona, what kind of changes she'd seen on the menu.

She responded that they were starting to serve new foods that encouraged students to try new things, and an example she gave was what happened to be that particular day's main entrée: clam strips, which had been deep-fried and frozen by a processor before reaching the school, where they were baked in the cafeteria's ovens. Perhaps not surprisingly, students did not respond favorably to this item. Even on an average day, the most popular foods at this school were pizza and chicken tenders or chicken patty sandwiches. On the day clam strips were served, however, these were even more popular and, with few exceptions, students expressed little interest in this new item. Some students would ask to sample them, or a worker on the line would offer a sample, but only one student in Leona's line over four lunch periods chose that as his main entrée. Nevertheless, the introduction of this new food was seen as an example of how the cafeteria was trying to change, even if that new food was created with the old (and problematic) formula.

In terms of being the face of change, most staff I spoke with did not feel it was their role to tell students what they should eat and they did not think it should be. They felt that young people and their parents should have the freedom to decide what they want to eat, and that policing food choices would compromise the most rewarding and enjoyable part of their job. I asked cafeteria staff if they ever make suggestions to students or speak up if students are making unhealthy food choices and, with a few exceptions, they did not. Any comments they might make would be subtle, such as "Is that all you're havin' today?" or "Are ya sure you don't want another side?" Regarding the health of the foods, staff preferred to stay silent and, for the most part, did not consider the meals they were serving to be problematic.

### ***Discussion and Conclusion***

The work performed by the cafeteria staff I observed in this study involved emotional labor, but my research suggests that it was not demeaning in the way that Hochschild (1983) and others conceptualize it to be in service work. The school food service workers in this study occupied unique spaces in the world of service work, as the organizations they worked for did not compete for customers in the same way that traditional food service establishments do. This resulted in a situation where the work was less routine, more autonomous, and based on relationships with customers rather than simple, one-time encounters. Additionally, the status differential between work and customers was reduced, which facilitated rewarding outcomes of emotional labor over “psychologically damaging” ones.

While the emotional labor that cafeteria staff performed was rewarding for the majority of those I interviewed and observed in this study, the technical aspects of the job were less-so. Because the emotional labor staff performed for customers was more rewarding than the technical labor they performed for employers, worker allegiances were prone to being with customers. This finding is consistent with research on the service sector that has found that workers may ally themselves with customers against organizational goals when the two are in conflict (Leidner 1993; Sallaz 2002). From a role-theoretic perspective, employees who work with customers have been conceptualized as “brokers” between an organization and its customers (Troyer, Mueller, and Osinsky 2000). This position of “serving two bosses” causes customer workers to experience greater role conflict because they are often confronted with competing demands from the organization they work for and the customers they

serve. The “worker-client-management interest alliance” (Leidner 1999) sheds important light on the school food reform process and its reversals, particularly at Glendale, where changes mandated by the school board and instituted by a new food service director were resisted by students, teachers, and food service staff alike. Eventually this lack of support for change brought about a reversal of policies that were perceived to be too extreme by the school community.

As earlier descriptions of the technical work that cafeteria staff perform indicated, the social organization of school nutrition programs, and feeding more broadly (DeVault 1991), had implications for the emotional and technical aspects of food service work in schools. While women found their emotional labor rewarding and identity-affirming, their technical work was not highly valued and was taken for granted by the larger system of which it was a part, resulting in work roles that neither required previous training nor offered regular professional development opportunities. Additionally, the emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) that staff performed reinforced their nurturing role as “moms” of the schools where they work. The result of this dynamic was that emotional role of cafeteria staff vis-à-vis students was enabling for workers in the construction of their identity while the technical role was constraining.

These findings imply that the value of food service staff is not fully recognized by the system of which they are a part. Professionalization opportunities are, for example, available, but they are rare and, as participants in this study suggest, workers are not always aware of them. Where they do exist or are known about, staff who participate in trainings may be met with resistance by their food service directors when returning to their school’s cafeterias, as was reported by one of the directors I spoke

with who led a state-wide training for cafeteria staff. Professionalizing the role of service workers by providing knowledge about basic nutrition and enhancing skills for the many dimensions of the job beyond serving food may enhance the role workers can play in moving food reform initiatives along. It may also increase their desire and willingness to support change.

In addition to few opportunities for training and professional development, food service staff are also paid low wages, even though labor costs can comprise over half of a food program's budget.<sup>18</sup> Increased government spending on nutrition programs to improve not only the nutrition but also the wages of workers is an important step in demonstrating that staff in these positions are an integral part of food service programs and play a valued role in carrying out nutritional objectives.

Appreciation of the role that food service staff play in schools is not only about enhancing professional development and salaries, but fully realizing what the position entails and why it merits these changes. Many commentators have suggested that our lunch programs need to be overhauled, not just reformed, and such a transformation of food in schools carries with it an enhanced role for staff. In most schools, food service staff are not seen as the educators they really are in an invisible, yet extremely powerful curriculum (Brownell and Horgen 2004; Cooper and Holmes 2006; Poppendeick 2010). As Poppendeick (2010: 276) notes, dismissing lunch as separate from the formal educational experience "goes hand in hand with a dismissive attitude toward school food service staff, simultaneously undervaluing and underutilizing the

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<sup>18</sup> All but a few employees in this study were full-time with benefits, though this is not typical across the country (see, for example, Poppendeick 2010).



contributions of an entire set of adults on the school premises who could be allies in the accomplishment of the school's basic mission.”

Overall, this chapter has suggested that greater appreciation for the critical role that cafeteria staff play in the school and in the lives of students is a necessary starting point for enhancing their role in reform and reducing the tension they face as buffers between students and the reform movement. The relationships that staff have with many of the students in schools can be an important foundation for the kind of change being called for in school cafeterias. As future research seeks to understand what facilitates and obstructs changes in school nutrition program around the country, the role food service staff cannot be ignored.

## CHAPTER 6

### SCHOOL CULTURE, STUDENT AGENCY, AND THE STRUCTURE OF SCHOOL FOOD

Current attention to schools in response to the issue of childhood obesity is only the most recent chapter in a long history of concern over the role of food in American schools. Specific issues in the past have ranged from the appropriate role of government, the public, and private businesses in providing food to schoolchildren, to federal and state regulations regarding allocation of resources, to attitudes about the best way to manage school feeding programs (Gunderson 1971; Lautenschlager 2006; Levine 2008; Poppendieck 2010; Robin 1968; Sims 1998). As this history as unfolded, the agents of change in the school food environment have represented a wide range of societal sectors, from local community members, private charities, and home economists, to state and federal government and national-level organizations such as the School Nutrition Association. Meanwhile, an obvious group of actors has been largely overlooked: the consumers of food in schools themselves, students.

The absence of attention to youth voices in this context is ironic but not surprising. On one hand, students are at the core of the educational system; they are the reason it exists. Yet, Ballantine (1997: 178) notes that “students are at the bottom of the role hierarchy ... while they are a numerical majority in the system, they are a distinct minority in decision making. Often students are spoken of as an almost alien group—the enemy; the group to be ‘subdued,’ disciplined, or conquered by the school staff.” McQuillan (2005) argues that in terms of the formal power that students hold

in schools, American students are, for the most part, “institutional nonentities” (640). While U.S. schools ostensibly strive to prepare their students for democratic citizenship, in reality they treat students as passive and subordinate in what are largely undemocratic educational environments. In their discussion of the overlapping spheres of influence between home, school, and community, Epstein and Sanders (2000: 294-95) note that “most often, students feel acted on rather than like actors and done to rather than like doers in their education.”

Evidence of this pattern of inattention to students is found in the long history of school reform in the United States: adults have consistently thought of students as the beneficiaries of change, but they have rarely thought of them as participants in the processes of change (Cook-Sather 2002; Corbett and Wilson 1995; Fullan 2001; Levin 2000). According to McQuillan (2005), “Although U.S. schools commonly accord students little formal power, student empowerment holds considerable promise for improving American education” (640). In this chapter, I argue the same applies to improving the school food environment. I do so by investigating how ideas about the role of schooling and the student role in that process relate to how students interact with the school food environment and how these interactions serve to reproduce or reform it over time. I begin by discussing traditional and progressive philosophies of education and then applying these to school food reform more specifically by comparing the progressive culture at the Longview school with the more traditional cultures of the other three schools in this study. I argue that the normative school culture at Longview empowered students to be active participants in constructing and reshaping their food environment, and that this case is useful for broadening

understanding of school food reform to encompass the structure of schooling itself.

### ***The Role of Students and Schools: Traditional and Progressive Philosophies***

The ways the public views schools says a great deal about the way they view students. What we expect of schools is dependent in part on what we think students need and how we believe they are best suited to acquire it. To understand the student role in schools, therefore, it is helpful to understand diverse perspectives about the purpose of schools themselves. As Ballantine (1997: 23) notes, “The basic functions or purposes of education are the same in most societies, but the importance of these functions and the means of achieving them vary greatly among societies and even among groups or social classes within each society.” These functions include socialization, cultural transmission, social control and personal development, and training and “sorting” individuals for their roles in society. Some of these roles are controversial, others are implicitly carried out through the hidden curriculum (Jackson 1968), while still others are a more explicit and widely agreed-upon function of the formal or official curriculum. As Hallinan (2005) points out, schools differ in the norms they establish regarding student civic and social participation. Some prioritize student involvement in the political life of the school and student government, while, for example, others emphasize the importance of social behaviors such as inclusiveness, tolerance, and respect toward others.

Perspectives about the role of the student in school are necessarily tied to debates that began in the late 1800s about the appropriate role of schools. Dewey (1997) observed that people like to think in terms of extreme opposites, that we

formulate our beliefs in terms of “Either-Ors,” between which we do not recognize intermediate possibilities. He notes that in educational theory, this opposition is between traditional and progressive education, or “opposition between the idea that education is development from within and that it is formation from without” (p. 17). While these two approaches to education differ in significant ways, neither wholly rejects the other in practice. For example, some schools might be driven by a traditional philosophy about students, yet share traditional views about the school itself, or vice versa. Others might be founded on progressive ideas about education, but have traditional components blended into the structure of the school and its treatment of students. In other words, a purely progressive or traditional model is not likely to exist in reality. Nevertheless, framing in terms of these ideal types (Weber 1978) is useful for thinking about how traditional versus progressive education perspectives shape our current thinking about food in schools.

Traditional education and the “back to basics” movement that supported adherence to it in the 1970s are characterized by a central focus on the academic purpose of schooling, while progressive educators have viewed both schools and students more broadly to encompass the social functions of education and social development of students (Ballantine 1997; Davies 2002; Nehring 2006; Reese 2001). Dewey (1998) contended that schools were not conducive to student learning because they were irrelevant to students’ lives, they lacked innovation, and they had an authoritarian structure that alienated students. The progressive movement that grew out of his work has subsequently argued that education should have immediate relevance for children, and that students should be actively involved in their learning

experience. Similarly, Bronfenbrenner (1979) conceived of a distinctly different view of the student's role in education, suggesting that socialization and education should be organized to give developing students more power as they advance through their schooling. His ideas have been supported by research showing that giving students age-appropriate opportunities for decision-making increases both independence and other school-related outcomes (Epstein 1983; Epstein and Sanders 2000).

For the most part, the debate about the purpose of and student role in schooling has not been brought to bear on school food reform, but as I argue it has a great deal to contribute to our understanding why change is elusive in so many schools.

Poppendeick (2010) suggests that two tensions that must be resolved before school food reform can be successful are between how society views schools and how society views students. In terms of how society views schools, and put into the language of school reform more broadly, the tension is between the traditional perspective that meal times are an interruption to the school day and the progressive view that these meals are integral to it.

The way school food reform is approached and the form it takes depends on how these tensions are resolved. In terms of how society views students, the traditional perspective considers students as customers in the cafeteria, meaning that responsibility for and authority over what they eat lies within the individual consumer. From a more holistic standpoint, students participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) are not only customers in school cafeterias but also participants in one of the country's most important social welfare programs—one that progressives fought hard to bring about in the early 1900s. This program and the people who

oversee it have both the authority and the responsibility to serve healthy meals to students every day. In contrast to the traditional view of students and learning, the progressive perspective considers students as whole persons in the cafeteria, and the learning that takes place there through informal interactions is as legitimate as that which takes place formally in classrooms throughout the school day. Lunch time teaches students normative expectations and cultural values around food preparation and consumption in real and important ways that are for the most part neglected in mainstream education.

In summary, traditional and progressive perspectives imply a role of schooling and a role for students marked by a tension between the student as only a learner and the student as a whole person. How we view the role of schooling (e.g. whether it is to impart academic knowledge on students or to facilitate holistic personal growth) affects how we view the role of student (e.g. passive recipient of knowledge or active owner of one's own learning process). These oppositions manifest themselves in classrooms throughout the school day, and they have been at the core of scholarly debates between philosophies of education over the past 100 years. However, little attention has been paid to how this conflict exists and perpetuates the status quo in the school food environment, particularly in cafeterias. How much we focus on students holistically versus on compartmentalized parts of the self (e.g. academic learner) contributes to how we view time spent outside of the classroom where learning nevertheless takes place.

### ***Student Perceptions of Food in School***

Although student voices are not neglected in the literature about school food, they are not prominent. A number of studies have analyzed adolescent food consumption habits in general (Neumark-Sztainer et al. 1999, Young and Fors 2001, Shepherd et al. 2006, Ludvigsen and Scott 2009) and student opinions about school food in particular (Gordon, Crepinsek, Nogales, and Condon 2007; Marples and Spillman 1995; Meyer 2000a; Meyer 2000b; Meyer and Conklin 1998). These studies suggest that although high school students demonstrate a propensity to consume foods high in fat, sodium, and sugar, their dissatisfaction with school food service programs tends to be based on the taste, variety, and quality of foods sold in school.

Little has been explicitly written, however, about student responses to current school food reform efforts. Because students are major stakeholders and because their perspective is not widely known, insight into what they have to say about food reform in school is critical. My interviews with students indicated a paradox existed in that student tastes influenced what kinds of foods were sold in school cafeterias, yet—with the exception of Longview—students reported they were highly dissatisfied with these foods. Furthermore, when asked if they have any control over what is sold in their cafeterias, most students did not seem to recognize that their perceived tastes played a substantial role in shaping what was sold. Finally, the complaints that students voiced about food were generally not congruent with the criticisms leveled by the current reform movement to make food in schools healthier. That is to say, most students were not dissatisfied with the nutritional content of their food, but rather the taste,



variety, and quality of it. Some students mentioned nutritional content as their biggest concern with food in schools, but most of these students voiced discontent with the recent shift to healthier foods in school (particularly the change to whole wheat breads and pastas) rather than a lack of nutritional value in the food.

In addition to this list of concerns, many students also rather candidly admitted that even though the negative claims that students made about school lunch were true to some degree, there was also a stigma against school food that perpetuated student dissatisfaction with it. The five main perceptions students discussed pertaining to school food (taste, variety, quality, nutrition, and reputation) are discussed in turn below.

### Taste

At first glance, it is difficult to understand how a typical school lunch menu fails to please the average adolescent palate. When students were asked what their favorite foods were in general (i.e. what foods they liked to eat outside of school), in each group I spoke with the most popular response was pizza, followed closely by chicken nuggets or chicken patty sandwiches. The third most popular food was pasta, particularly macaroni and cheese and spaghetti. As previously noted, the typical menu at each of the schools catered to these preferences, with one day each week typically set aside for pizza and another for deep-fried items such as chicken patty sandwiches (which Lakeside still offered daily as an alternative to the main hot entrée).

Students also complained regularly about the extent to which the lunch foods were frozen and reheated at the school, or what cafeteria staff referred to as “heat and

serve.” For example, at Jeffersonville, where the Food Service Director and head cook stated that they placed a priority on providing meals made from scratch, the cook estimated that 70% of the food she prepares was nevertheless heat and serve.

Although students at each of the mainstream schools complained about this,<sup>19</sup> at the same time, when asked about their preferences for purchasing lunch off campus or eating out for other meals, they most frequently listed popular fast food establishments where meals were not made from scratch either. When students were asked about whether they cooked at home, some of the most popular items students mentioned making for themselves were frozen foods that students simply reheated before eating. While many students’ favorite foods were as much “from scratch” as school lunches were, they reasoned that the former were more acceptable primarily because they tasted better, but also because they were consumed less frequently and they did not have the poor reputation that school food suffers from.

### Variety

Students not only expected better quality and nutrition from school lunch than they did from fast food, they also expected more variety. Interestingly, this finding was consistent across all four schools, regardless of the size of the school’s menu. Most students who bought their lunches at school seemed to actually like the pizza and chicken patty sandwiches that were available every day; they just didn’t want to eat them every day. Students in every school considered the options to be very repetitive and they wanted more variety. Although the main entrée options did change on a

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<sup>19</sup> Longview students did not have this complaint because, with little exception, the school’s lunches were made by the school cook himself with as few processed ingredients as possible.

daily basis, students perceived their choices to be particularly repetitive because often the main hot entrée was undesirable, causing them to resort to buying the foods that were offered every day (and in a sort of catch-22, these foods were offered every day because directors knew they were popular). At Longview these foods were pizza and chicken sandwiches, while at Glendale and Jeffersonville they were wraps made to order. Longview had the most repetitive menu of all the schools—a kind of “trade-off,” as a staff member put it, for being able to source higher quality food from vendors they selected themselves. Each day of the week was assigned an entrée that repeated throughout the year (i.e. pasta was served every Monday, burritos on Tuesdays, pizza on Wednesdays, a vegetarian entrée on Thursdays—this day had the most variety—and Friday’s meals were also varied.) Every day the sides were the same: a salad with leafy green lettuce (as opposed to ice burg lettuce in the other schools), garlic bread, and fruit.

### Quality

In addition to better tasting food and more variety, students voiced a strong preference for higher quality—and particularly “fresher”—foods in the cafeteria. Some of the most items students listed most frequently when asked about what they’d like to see offered more often were salad bars and fresh fruits and vegetables. Although this could indicate a preference for healthy food, it appeared to be more indicative of a desire for higher quality than more nutritious food. This is because fruits and vegetables were available every day as a part of each meal, but most students were dismissive of these foods because of the way they were prepared or pre-

packaged. The following excerpt from a focus group with students illustrates how this was so:

Joe: ... the salads don't look healthy.

Kim: No--they're just iceberg lettuce, there's no nutrition in it/

[Talking over each other in agreement]

Kim: And half the time the lettuce isn't even good, it's like brown.

Megan: And their version of vegetables is like cooked green beans from a can and that's disgusting ... And like there's not fruit--they give us fruits, but most of the time they're like crappy apples and bruised bananas and/

Kim: And if they [have other fruit] it's sugary and canned/

Joe: in like glucose syrup.

### Nutrition

Student comments about the nutritional value of food were also prominent in interviews, though students differed in how they felt about this topic. A minority of students wanted healthier options such as those mentioned along with the request for better quality. More commonly, students were dissatisfied with the lunch program's efforts to serve healthier food—an effort that has been largely focused on using whole wheat bread and pasta products. Student discussions of healthier food in schools indicated that students did not like “healthy” food because for them it was synonymous with whole grain foods. This was not surprising, since the biggest

changes that food service directors had implemented in their food programs was a switch from white to brown rice and whole grain breads and pastas, which students did not like as much as the white alternatives to which they were accustomed.

### Reputation

Overall, the primary complaints that students had about food in school were about taste, variety, quality and to some degree, nutrition. However, as mentioned earlier, these same criticisms hold true for many of the favorite foods that students listed in interviews. When students were asked about this seeming inconsistency, many students responded by admitting that school food has a bad reputation because it has always had a poor image, and students perpetuated this by “talking about school food just to have something to talk about” with friends at lunch.

### ***Student Responses to Food in School***

Just as students framed their dissatisfaction with school food in a variety of ways, the ways they responded to their options as consumers was also varied. In the three conventional schools in this study, student responses were characterized largely by passive apathy, while at the Longview school the response was considerably more proactive. At all of the schools, students fell into four main categories based on their level of consumption of and concern about food served in school. In order of frequency, these are: 1) Low Concern/High Consumption; 2) Low concern/low consumption; 3) High concern/high consumption; 4) High concern/low consumption. Perhaps not surprisingly, students in the low concern categories comprised the

majority of my sample. These students either had little to say about the foods available in their school beyond predictable protests of dissatisfaction, or they genuinely liked the food or at least felt that it “served its purpose.” Their general attitude toward food was summed up by a student at Glendale who said, “I don’t really care, you know? It’s just food.” The students who had higher levels of concern had much more to say about their thoughts on food in schools and were more detailed in their criticisms. They went beyond descriptions how the food tasted to raise more complex issues, such as concerns that the lunch program reproduces social inequality and health disparities by forcing low-income students to eat unhealthy foods. Longview, however, was the only school where the minority of students concerned about school food were able to act on that concern and bring about changes to the structure of their school’s food service program.

#### Low concern/high consumption

When I first started my observations in cafeterias and was asked by students why I was in their schools, my response that I was studying food in schools was almost always met with emphatic responses: the food was “nasty,” it was “mystery meat,” it was “so gross.” While these responses were not surprising considering the reputation of school food service, also not surprising was that the formal interviews I conducted with students painted a more complicated picture than these informal exchanges did. Despite how students spoke at a superficial level of their dissatisfaction with food in school, the discontent among the majority of students I spoke with did not run deep. When probed about their opinions, most students were

ultimately rather unconcerned about the topic of food in school and were more or less content to patronize the cafeteria regularly. Even if they were not purchasing hot entrées every day, almost everyone at least occasionally purchased a la carte items.

Student discussions about why they were not more concerned about school food revealed four main reasons for what appeared to be apathy or resignation. First, they recognized that school food is something they largely take for granted because it has been a part of their daily school life since they were five years old. Second, many students reasoned that schools are doing the best they can with the limited budget have for serving a large number of students. Third, a large number of students pointed out that the convenience and price of meals are worth the compromised quality of the food. The extra time it would take these students to pack a lunch in the morning wouldn't be worth the trade-off, so they were willing to settle for meals they considered to be lower in quality, flavor, and novelty. Fourth, "low concern/high consumption" students also consistently suggested that food in school is not as bad as other students suggest, but rather that these conversations just give people something to talk about:

Of course there's the whole thing where people like to over-exaggerate about how bad school meal's quality is, like "yeah, it's probably all poison on the menu" and it really isn't. Sometimes you get some of that bad mystery meat, but it's not that bad ... I mean, we've got a budget and there's tons of things that need money, so I guess the food's fine for what it is.

There was a period where I brought my lunch, I made time to make my lunch, because I got sick of my friends saying "Oh, you're eating school lunch"--like they'd make gross comments about it and it just got really annoying. And so it is a lot of mental stuff, that a lot of people think cafeteria food is gross, so you start thinking that. And it is, but ...

These students, who represented the largest segment of my sample, were not likely to mention health concerns or the long-term effects of a poor diet. The health teachers I spoke to, however, provided insight into why this might be so. Although the following comments were made before I spoke to any students, they accurately predicted what I discovered in later interviews with them:

I think they're not thinking about these things yet. They still feel like they can eat whatever they want and get away with it and it's okay ... I think it sometimes hits them afterwards, not when they're this young ... Some students do [think about nutrition], so it's not all of them of course, but I just think they think that they look at what they eat and see they're not gaining weight and think "This is stupid." It's something they'll have to figure out years down the road. (Lakeside Health Teacher)



There are some kids who really care about what they put in their body. They have a very mature outlook, I think, about what they're eating. And then you get the kids who say "I'm not fat, so it doesn't matter" ... Kids could care less about sodium, because that gives you high blood pressure when you're old, so they don't care about that. Calories, "I don't care about calories because I'm gonna use them all up." And the fat--"heart disease? Diabetes? Psh---that happens to old people. (Jeffersonville Health Teacher)

A lot of the high school kids ... it doesn't faze them yet but they haven't connected yet that "Maybe I should start now." We talk about how most eating habits are formed when you're young ... but it's hard for them to see the big picture. (Glendale Health Teacher)

#### Low concern/low consumption

Students in this category avoided the issue of school food almost entirely by bringing lunch from home or nearby restaurants. They tended not to participate in the school lunch program for one of two reasons. First, most students I spoke with preferred bringing their own food because they either did not like the school lunches they had eaten in the past or they reported feeling sick or not well after eating food at school. Second, there were also students who had never eaten school lunch and assumed they would not like it based on its appearance and reputation. Students in this category still purchased a la carte items, most frequently bottled beverages or desserts,

to supplement a main meal they brought from home, but the majority of their food did not come from school. These students were likely to have more affluent parents who made healthy food choices at home, prepare home-cooked meals for dinner, and either packed a lunch for their children or made sure they had healthy options at home to pack themselves. A few parents even drove to school every day at lunchtime with carry-out for their children, a trend that both teachers and principals mentioned being surprised to see arise in recent years because of the time and expense required on the part of parents.

#### High concern/high consumption

The students who fell into this category were thoughtful about their food choices, preferred to eat nutritionally balanced and high-quality food, but felt that they compromised these ideals when forced to eat food at school. The most obvious candidates for this category were students who qualified for FRPL and could not afford an alternative. For example, a student I spoke with who paid the reduced rate (25 cents) for lunch stated in an interview:

I'm pretty dissatisfied with the food. Mostly because it's so unhealthy.

I personally have to get school lunches every day because I can't afford anything else ... But I usually get the same things every day. I get a chicken patty and I scrape the coating off of it. Because I feel like nothing else is even remotely healthy ... My big issue is that I would never eat meat at all if it weren't for school food. I feel like I'm sort of

forced to because ... I can't afford anything else and all the other stuff is really greasy and unhealthy.

On the day I was talking to her, this student had decided to try the main entrée, which was beef burritos:

I got them on a whim. I asked them if they're [the burritos] fried. They say they're not,<sup>20</sup> but I'm a little skeptical, which makes me a little nervous and they're like beef and bean and I never eat beef otherwise—ever ever ever—so I'm sort of not looking forward to eating these. But it's what I can afford.

In addition to low-income students, however, an equally prominent population in this category was students short on time and seeking convenience. When I asked students how they decided where to get their lunch, the convenience of school lunch was the most frequently cited reason. (Many students also cited the low cost, though the focus groups may have biased this response since FRPL students might not have wanted to identify themselves as such among their peers.) Although the NSLP was created as a food assistance program to serve low-income families, nutrition programs

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<sup>20</sup> The burritos this student is referring to did appear to be fried, though it was difficult to ascertain whether this was the case. The reason for this ambiguity is that fried foods in the school are not labeled as such. All schools in this study have removed deep-fryers from their kitchens, though they still serve frozen foods that have been deep-fried by a food processing company before being frozen and shipped to the school. At the school, these foods were baked instead of being reheated in a deep-fryer, so descriptions about “baked” versus “deep-fried” foods can be complicated.

in schools are also important for students who are short on time. For example, every school nurse I spoke with reported that students regularly came into their offices feeling unwell because they had not eaten breakfast, or because they had eaten very little during the day. As one nurse explained, these visits were most often due to shortages of time rather than money:

Interviewer: Do you see as the nurse any instances where students come in not feeling well because they haven't eaten?

Nurse: Oh, every day ... [and with] a whole range of students. We do have a few [who are low income], but those are easy fixes actually, because if we find out the financial is an issue we can get a lot of things in place for them. For the majority of the kids it's just a matter of not wanting to get up in time to eat anything, making a pop-tart choice versus something a little more healthful, not wanting to take time during our mid-morning break at 9:30.

#### High Concern/low consumption

The students in this category were a small minority of students who went beyond descriptions of the food in school to raise more complex issues, such as concerns that the lunch program reproduces social inequality and health disparities by forcing low-income students to eat unhealthy foods. These students packed lunches from home because they felt that school meals were lower in nutrition and quality than

the food they were used to eating at home. Many students also referred to the values their parents instilled in them about food, such as adherence to vegetarian or vegan diets. These students appeared to be socialized at home to care about issues of social justice, human rights, and animal rights as they related to food choices and they extended these values to school lunch as well. A small percentage of students also fell into this category because they had food allergies or diseases such as type 1 diabetes. They were unable to eat school meals because of dietary restrictions that the schools were unable to cater to, and they were concerned about the implications of this for low-income students with similar restrictions.

Overall, the majority of students in all the schools fell into the “low concern” category, where they did little to attempt to modify the structure of food in their schools. Even if they were dissatisfied to some degree, their overall ambivalence about food and their regular patronage in the lunch line or their complete avoidance of it reinforced and reproduced the structure of school lunch. For those consuming school lunch, their patronage suggested to FSDs that the program was “good enough” and did not need to change. Students who brought food from home but supplemented with a la carte items provided lunch programs with critical revenues. As explained in an earlier chapter, because of how school lunch financing works, students who have the expendable income to purchase a la carte items may have the most influence as consumers. Although students who are highly concerned about the food environment are in the minority at every school, they are making an impact at the Longview school. In the following section, I analyze the conditions at this school that make this possible.

***“High Concern” Students as Change Agents: The case of Longview***

Although students who were highly concerned about the school food environment were in the minority at every school in this study, at Longview this population was nevertheless able to participate in reform efforts. Longview was a public middle- and high school located in the same district as Lakeside, but it had an alternative curriculum and an equally alternative approach to its school food environment. Approximately 250 students attended the school, which was characterized by a democratic form of education whereby students had a strong voice in decision-making and were encouraged to be actively involved in shaping day-to-day operations. The school’s approach to education was encapsulated in quotes painted on the gymnasium’s walls along with pictures of historical figures whose educational philosophies had been instrumental in shaping the school: John Dewey, A. S. Neil, Septima Clark, Margaret Mead, John Holt, and the school’s founder. Interspersed between the portraits were belief statements of the school: “We believe in being a fair, caring, democratically run school community,” “We believe that learning can be of value to students in their present lives, not just for the future, and that students have a place in and can make contribution to their society,” “We believe the affective and creative aspects of learning are as valuable as objective and conceptual learning,” and “We believe that students should feel ownership of their school and their education.”

The three primary ways students participated in the school and its system of self-governance were through what were referred to as “school-wide assemblies (SWAs),” “affinity circles,” and “working groups.” SWAs were weekly, student-run meetings lasting one 45-minute class period where the entire school community

discussed and decided on issues pertinent to the school. These issues were usually brought to the assembly's attention by student and staff proposals, pertaining to, for example, changes to school policies or implementation of new school-wide practices. Affinity circles met two times each week and consisted of about twelve students who were advised by one or two members of the faculty or staff. The circles fulfilled a number of purposes, from serving as a home room where students checked in with their advisors and heard school announcements to including more involved tasks, such as fundraising for activities that students participated in outside of school. Finally, working groups helped run the school, taking on responsibilities ranging from custodial work to conflict mediation to environmental action to food service. Some affinity circles and working groups overlapped, meaning that these students and advisors saw each other on a more frequent and intense basis and were able to take on larger projects. Two of these combined affinity circles/working groups were associated with the food service program at Longview and both demonstrated how the democratic culture at the school provided students with opportunities to be agents for, not only recipients of, school food reform. The first group was simply called the "Kitchen Crew" and the second was the "Go Local" team. These are described in turn below.

The only paid position in the lunch program at Longview was the head cook, who happened to be an alumnus of the school. The rest of the work involved in feeding approximately 250 students, faculty and staff every day was performed by the "Kitchen Crew": approximately a dozen students and two faculty advisors, both of whom had voluntarily taken on the extra responsibility. The cook was responsible for

the bulk of the cooking, due to the fact that this necessarily took place while students were in class. Because the cafeteria at Longview was housed in a multi-purpose space (a gymnasium for the majority of the day, students and staff transformed it into an eating and food service area for the lunch hour), the first responsibility of students was to make sure this transformation occurred in a timely manner every day. Students also served food to their peers, washed dishes, cleaned the kitchen, wiped down tables, and kept food stocked on the lunch line. The commitment required of students (and faculty) on the Kitchen Crew was considerable. In addition to their work over the lunch period, students were also required to work in the kitchen during any free periods they had during the school day. During these periods, students sometimes cooked or prepared food (something every student interviewed wished they could have done more of) or they worked at the kitchen's window, where students could purchase snack items throughout the day (this window served as a substitute for vending machines).

In total, students worked 270 hours over the course of the school year with no pay, though they were rewarded at the end of the year with a 10-day trip that is an important incentive for students. Student involvement in the food service program was a source of pride for the school and gave many who participated in it a greater appreciation for the food than they otherwise might have had, as reflected in the following statement made by a student:

I think the group part of it was really, really interesting, being a part of actually serving lunch every day. You appreciate it a lot more and I



think that that was a really important part of my, like, "food education" here because I know the struggles the cafeteria goes through on the internal side ... so the rest of the school might say, "well, why don't you get better food?" but now after working [in the kitchen] I know that that's not always possible because there are state regulations, there are things you can't get from local places, you know, things like that.

Although the model of student involvement and higher quality meals made from scratch was unique to Longview's food service program, the cafeteria had operated the same way for nearly 20 years and, in the opinion of some students, it was resistant to further change and had not been innovative enough with regards to increasing public concerns about food, health, and the environment. In response, these students have found a platform for change through their involvement in the "Go Local" affinity circle and working group. Many of the members of this combined circle/group were former Kitchen Crew workers who were passionate about food and challenged school to take more drastic steps to innovate with their menus, source food from more local farmers, and incorporate more food that had been produced by the students themselves.

The teachers who advised the "Go Local" team created the group in the fall after data collection for this project began, originally starting with plans to expand the school's garden and perform community service with local farms in exchange for produce. By the end of the first year, the group was contributing basil, garlic, bell peppers, carrots, apples, and other produce to the school's kitchen. The team's advisor

acquired two deep freezers for the school's basement to store foods that could not be used immediately, and they processed ingredients into pesto, apple sauce, carrot soup, and other dishes for the cafeteria to add into their meal rotation. By the end of their second year, the "Go Local" group had collaborated with community groups to run a four-acre farm that provided food to the school as well as to a local farmers' market and a community supported agriculture (CSA). This group provided the kind of innovation that students dissatisfied with the school's food service program believed it needed. As one student stated:

I really enjoy seeing students, seeing my friends, having younger kids behind the counter, having that relationship with our food and that we're owning it, and that we can be--and even more so [since the "Go Local" group started]--that we can have an influence over what's there ... you can see that actions people are taking are directly influencing what we're eating, and that's really cool ... And when people say "oh, you know what's for lunch?" and they hear it's something different, it's exciting and people go just to get it.

### ***Discussion***

Durkheim (1973) wrote that the cultural norms and values of the dominant members of society are embedded in the social practices and institutions of society, particularly educational institutions. Thus, the norms of a society are typically reflected in the normative culture of its schools, or what Hallinan (2005: 130)

describes as “the set of norms, values, and meanings that are endorsed by significant member of the school community.” The norms that make up this culture are evident in the rules and standards that shape student participation in the social life of the school, and the culture around these norms in schools affect students’ academic, social, and moral development. Although American schools have traditionally concentrated on the academic development of young people, contemporary social problems in the United States have led to a progressive stance that draws closer attention to the socializing function of education. Examples of these problems include school violence, suicide, drug and alcohol use, and adolescent sexual activity. More recently, obesity and childhood health have been added to and sit near the top of that list. As these issues arise, we tend to question agents of socialization, particularly families and the education system (Hallinan 2005). In regards to traditional at-risk behaviors, schools emphasize preparing students to resist pressures they face inside and outside of school and training students to contribute to the social and moral order in both their school and wider society.

In this chapter, I have focused in particular on the normative culture of schools around social behavior and argued that a school culture that empowers students to fully participate in and take ownership of their educational experience sees the student and the curriculum holistically. This kind of school culture can facilitate school food reform because it does away with the traditional separation of meal time from the formal curriculum, and it does not neglect the “student-as-learner” during this time of day in exchange for the “student-as-consumer” that is traditionally the case in mainstream education.

Hallinan (2005: 129) notes that “As a microcosm of society, the school reflects the stresses, strains, and dysfunctions of the adult world. The task of socializing students in this kind of complex and challenging environment requires a better understanding of ways to influence students.” Social psychology, and more specifically symbolic interactionism, provide insights into how normative school cultures affect students’ cognitive and emotional states (Hallinan 2005). As outlined in chapter two, social interactions help individuals evaluate other people, events, and their environment. Through these interactions, we form our own identities through the feedback we receive from others. This perspective applied to schools suggests that students develop an understanding of themselves as they interact with teachers and peers, and they measure themselves against the norms established by the school and their peers. In the present study, the majority of students interviewed were largely dissatisfied with the school lunch program in their schools, yet most were neither concerned about the program nor were they motivated to do something about it. Ultimately, most students in three of the study’s four schools accepted the status quo and did little to attempt to modify it, either because they took the structure of school food for granted or because they felt there were no channels available for students to be agents for change.

Considering previous work on youth and schools, this assessment should not be surprising. As noted in the previous chapter on food service staff, students are not the only group of actors within schools for whom the need for change is not self-evident. Even among those who see a clear need for change, an over-riding reality is that doing something about food in schools requires taking on additional responsibility. Despite

the allure of empowering students and democratizing the education system to be more inclusive of their agency,Sizer (1984: 65) observed, “Happy dependence is a pleasant state for many adolescents ... [yet] most adolescents know they can do more.” We assume that students will be irresponsible—either academically, or in this case, as food consumers—and that prophecy can be self-fulfilling (Merton 1968; Sizer 1984). McQuillan (2005) notes that research in U.S. schools throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century discovered that students think of school “as essentially a social institution and often seek to limit responsibility so that they can realize their social interests” (652). In other words, empowerment may not be appealing or desirable to many adolescents. Despite students’ dis-satisfaction with food in schools, they are more likely to justify why things are the way they are and to minimize the degree to which they care when asked about whether students have ever attempted to change food in school.

In contrast, the Longview school provided an innovative and alternative approach to food service that was an extension of a larger culture permeating the school. Its contrast with the three mainstream schools in this study provides a useful and timely analysis of conditions under which student interaction with the school food environment can result in its reform rather than its reproduction. The democratic culture of Longview provided critical opportunities for students to challenge the conception of young people as “institutional nonentities” in school, in this case particularly through their participation in affinity circles, working groups and school-wide assemblies. Although only a minority of students participated in the groups specifically focused on food, all students also had the opportunity to provide input regarding food in school during weekly, student-led school wide assemblies. During

these assemblies, students and teachers could submit proposals for school members to vote on or respond to proposals brought to assembly by others in the school. Over the course of this research, for example, proposals included nutritional guidelines for foods sold as school fundraisers and policies for implementing and enforcing food composting at the school.

Additional factors were at play at Longview as well, one of the most critical being the teacher who advised the “Go Local” group. Serving as an “institutional agent” (Stanton-Salazar 2010), this person dedicated a substantial number of hours outside of school serving as a liaison between students and other actors in the school and wider community, accessing resources on behalf of students, providing them with the knowledge they needed to navigate the system they sought to change, promoting and guiding group decision-making, and helping students gather necessary information.

Longview also had the advantage of being smaller than the other schools in this study, with just over 250 students spread out over seven grades. Although Longview is a public school, families must apply to the school and admission is based on a lottery system. The population at Longview was therefore a self-selecting one of teachers, students, parents and administrators who were attuned to the school’s culture and invested in its approach to education. This approach, unlike that found in the study’s mainstream schools, was a holistic one that did not isolate school lunch from the formal curriculum and included student voices in its decisions.

Longview’s holistic approach to education illuminates how lessons from wider school reform can apply to school food reform in particular, and how the two may

ultimately be inextricably linked. It is impossible understand how students at Longview have been empowered to alter the food environment without understanding how and why the school's culture and model of education is different from that found in traditional schools. Sarason (1996) alludes to this kind of connection in his assessment of how school culture has hindered school reform efforts throughout the country:

From one perspective, the direction of change was clear: the different groups criticizing the schools wanted schools to be agent of social change, not to reflect values and traditions that supported the status quo. Schools did try to adapt to that role ... [but] little or nothing in the behavioral and programmatic regularities that are the hallmarks of the classroom and the school changed. That was not because school personnel were being perversely stubborn, resistant, or devious. It was because they were defining and responding to the problem in ways that assumed that changes could be accommodated within the existing structure and regularities of the classroom and school (376).

Many of the circumstances that allowed students to exert agency in the food environment at Longview were due to the unique and democratic culture of the school, which suggests that transforming the food environment in schools may be difficult without changing the culture of schools. The purpose of schooling and the role of the student in that process are connected to what we expect from food service programs

and the students who participate in them. Viewing lunch as an interruption to the school day neglects the reality that during this time students learn about nutrition, they develop social skills, and they absorb cultural values around food community membership, among other things. This learning takes place regardless of whether or not it is part of the formal curriculum, and regardless of whether or not the lessons, skills, and values involved are desirable. School food reform can take important cues from education reform more broadly and the philosophies of progressive educators that have called for a more holistic approach to how we conceive of both schools and students by creating opportunities for students to have both a voice and a role in reform.



## CHAPTER 7

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As TheodoreSizer (1984: 1) observed, “we pick particularly on the schools when we’re unhappy with ourselves in general.” The present attention to schools in response to childhood health and wellness is no exception. With unprecedented obesity rates and the often-cited prediction that the current generation of young people will have shorter lifespans than their parents (Olshansky 2005), society has not been happy with itself and we are indeed looking to schools to help solve this problem. Such a focus is not surprising, considering that, after families, schools are perhaps the most significant agent of socialization in a child’s life. The number of hours that children spend in schools makes them a logical focal point for addressing problems such as drug use, teen pregnancy, bullying, and most recently, unhealthy eating. Adolescent eating behaviors are unique to the list of historic problems schools have been singled out to address, however, because eating is a scheduled part of the school day. Or, more accurately, it is scheduled part of a day that is otherwise centered around traditional notions of what “school” is.

In this dissertation, I have investigated the role of schools in responding to concerns about children’s eating habits, particularly as these responses have been manifested in school cafeterias. I have analyzed the question of persistence and change in the school food environment by examining four high schools as they responded to community concerns and federal policy aimed at improving the quality and nutritional content of food in schools. Attempting to understand this issue through

the perspective of actors who are closest to the center of change, I have focused on the roles of food service directors, food service staff, and students. Interviews and observations revealed that resistance to change in the school food environment by these sets of actors was socially constructed, but it was understood by social actors to be part of an objective reality. Interpretations of the school food environment often cast food service directors as resistant to change, food service staff as incompetent and poorly trained, and students as apathetic and opposed to eating healthier food. The theoretical framework of this dissertation suggests a different interpretation, however. I have asked what school food reform means to these actors, how they have interpreted calls for change and their role in the process, and what their interpretations mean for change prospects. In particular, the framework has highlighted how different role expectations for each set of actors conflict with one another and with actors' definitions of their own roles in this process. Ultimately, I have argued that the expectations of school food reform have been incompatible with the day-to-day realities of the school food programs I studied. The actors who were assigned the role of making school food reform successful bore the brunt of these incompatible expectations and, as a result, were interpreted as obstacles to, rather than facilitators of, the change process.

Nevertheless, the food environment in schools is changing. The theoretical framework for this research also brings into focus how actor agency has been both constrained and enabled by the structure of school food service, and it suggests ways in which actors, as they reproduce the structure of food in school, also alter it over time. Although this research spans a relatively short span of time in a long process of

change, it has nevertheless uncovered some of the conditions under which actors maintain or change the structure of school food through their daily patterns of interactions that ultimately compose that structure.

In chapter four, I outlined how food service directors faced role conflict as they worked to satisfy state, federal, and district-level policies while also providing low-cost lunches that were healthy and desirable to students. Often, critiques of food service programs have argued that if we expect school food service programs to be nutrition programs, then they need to be allowed to operate as such, rather than as independent businesses and agriculture surplus outlets (Dillard 2008, Levine 2008, Poppendeick 2010). My own research draws this argument out further by illustrating how the conflicting expectations of food service directors in three specific school districts resulted in directors feeling alienated, misunderstood, and misperceived as obstinate by critics. Not surprisingly, the turnover in these positions has been rapid—within a five year time period, all three districts experienced the resignation or retirement of their food service directors. The inconsistency in expectations resulted in a situation for food service directors whereby they were serving three masters (the NSLP, its critics, and students) and could please none of them. Not surprisingly, this hindered efforts at school food reform and created further division between those who were trying to change the system from within and those who were attempting to change it from without. In addition to this role conflict, food service directors struggled with the role ambiguity that stemmed from varying definitions of “healthy.” Many of the changes that directors in this study had made or were in the process of

making met their own definitions of this term, but were questionable by the standards of other actors.

In chapter five, I addressed the role of food service workers, or “lunch ladies,” in the high schools where I conducted my research. While lunch ladies were perhaps the most important actors in the school cafeteria itself, their role has been drastically under-estimated in the literature on school food. Attention that is given to this role, if any, focuses on the technical aspects of the work that staff perform and the lack of cooking skills today’s school cooks possess, usually with the implication that this is an individual shortcoming of the staff members themselves. Meanwhile, the “emotional labor” that staff performed was what lunch ladies found most satisfying about their jobs and what students appreciated most about the work that staff performed.

Neglecting this critical aspect of the work that lunch ladies do not only presents an incomplete picture of the role they play in students lives, and it also fails to recognize the ways in which staff are empowered in cafeterias and how the rewarding and identity-affirming aspects of their work with students can undermine organizational goals for reform if such work is misunderstood or undervalued. In this chapter, I argued that if food service staff are to facilitate change, then the complexities of their roles vis-à-vis students must be recognized and used to enhance food service programs, not just be a happenstance benefit of the program.

Finally, in chapter six I discussed diverging philosophies about the role of schools in society and, by extension, the role expectations we have for students during the school day. I then underscored how inattention to youth agency in school reform more broadly has implications for school food reform specifically. I argued that if

students are viewed as learners throughout the school day and not only while receiving formal instruction in classrooms, then what they learn while eating at school—in the cafeteria and elsewhere—deserves closer attention. My research suggests that more formally recognizing lunch as a learning opportunity may have promising implications for food service, health education, and broader goals of education in general.

### ***Implications for Theory and Policy***

The purpose of this dissertation on a theoretical level has been to understand how day-to-day actions and peoples' interpretations of them are related to maintenance or modification of social structures over time, and how these structures enable and constrain actor agency. The findings of this study have demonstrated how structures and, in particular, roles, as they are embodied through the everyday interactions of incumbents, simultaneously constrain certain forms of agency while enabling others. More specifically, the empirical data presented in this dissertation has demonstrated the ways in which actors, through their day-to-day interactions, are both modifying and maintaining the structure of food in schools.

The study's findings illustrate the limitations of theoretical frameworks that conceptualize structure and agency as a dualism and that consider structure as constraining and agency as freedom from constraint (Giddens 1984, Fine 1991). At the same time, it illustrates how applying Giddens's theory of structuration through the lens of symbolic interaction can alleviate problems that have been cited with Giddens's lack of attention to the internal dynamics of actors in the process of structuration. In tandem with symbolic interactionism, structuration theory becomes a

particularly useful lens for understanding how structures, as they are constructed through the meanings social actors intersubjectively attach to them, are maintained and modified through everyday activity, and how these structures are both enabling and constraining. At the same time, this integration of the two theoretical traditions brings attention to how symbolic interactionism can be attentive to issues of structure, contrary to criticisms that this theory is astructural.

At the level of policy, it is important to consider what the empirical findings of this research mean for school food reform in the short, medium, and long term. It is widely believed that this reform process should be simple and straight-forward, and that when food service directors do not change their menus as much or as rapidly as many people would like, that the food service directors are not interested in improving the nutritional quality or content of their meals. Similarly, it is assumed that food service staff are resistant to change and that changing the eating habits of students will be impossible. However, as this study has demonstrated, there are structures within the school food system that constrain and enable actors in different ways, and these dynamics cannot be ignored in the reform process. Although recent policy changes and public pressure have encouraged schools to make healthy changes to their food environments, it is not enough to consider the policy context that is requiring schools to take more deliberate steps to bring healthy foods to students at lunch every day. It is important to consider how actors closest to the center of this change are being involved in the structures that shape this context and what meaning they attach to these structures and this context.

It is also essential to consider how healthy food itself is inserted into the structure of school food service. Considering the present context and desired outcomes, this dissertation argues that three shifts will be necessary within and outside of schools. The first is a shift from what are currently and essentially autonomous school food service businesses to school nutrition programs that are integrated holistically into the structure of schooling itself. The second is a shift from the consideration of food service work as merely technical to an appreciation for the complex, interpersonal, and educational aspects of the job. The third is a shift in the way the role of schools, and by extension, students, is conceptualized so that the learning opportunities offered by meal times are not lost on students.

The present is an exciting and dynamic time to be examining the food environment in schools, as an intense focus continues to be directed at schools and policies that regulate food are continually evolving at the local, state and federal level. In terms of the latter, the most recent policy changes came with the 2010 WIC and Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act. The findings of the present study can help decipher the promise of this legislation, and how future reauthorizations, which occur every five years, might increasingly point toward more meaningful change.

The most recent reauthorization (The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010) called for promising changes to the National School Lunch Program and, by extension, the wider food environment in which it rests. One of the goals of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act is to reinvigorate School Wellness Policies which, as this research and other research suggests, have so far had little impact on districts around the country. As with the 2004 legislation, this reauthorization requires that

policies address goals for nutrition education and physical activity and nutritional guidelines for foods sold in school, and that the policy be created by a committee representing a full range of stakeholders. The 2010 Act has a stronger focus on evaluation and enforcement, however, as it requires periodic assessment and reports on policy implementation and it makes technical assistance available to schools as they implement their policies.

The case studies in this research suggest that for the next iteration of School Wellness Policies to have a more significant impact, committee members will need to have a clearer understanding of what this process means to the actors most affected by the policies and what its provisions will require of them. In each of the three school districts, committee members who approached the task with the assumption that change would be simple were frustrated by complexities and also frustrated the food service directors who were faced with these complexities. The outcome was that the committees disintegrated—either after the sudden resignation of members or after the group’s momentum eventually deteriorated over time. The end results were policies that were either so vague that it would be difficult not to follow them or policies that were so unrealistic that they were not adhered to, and without consequence.

One aspect of the legislation that may assist School Wellness Committees as they establish nutritional guidelines for foods sold in school is that it calls for new nutrition standards for reimbursable lunches, which the USDA has not updated in nearly 15 years. However, as I have argued in this dissertation, how significant this change will be will depend on what meaning is attached to the new standards. At the writing of this dissertation, the new standards have not yet been developed, though this



process is being guided by the Institute of Medicine's (2007) guidelines. Public and private meetings, discussions, and other conversations about what school food should look like will take place as these guidelines are developed and, as these discussions have in the past, they are likely to create divisions around what "healthy" means and what realistic expectations are given the structure and culture around food in the United States more broadly.

Whatever standards are set for the National School Lunch Program, these will not apply to other foods sold in or near schools (unless local wellness policies dictate otherwise), such as those sold a la carte, in vending machines, or at school bake sales. Isolating reform to one part of the school food environment limits the potential for change, because with other outlets for less healthful food within reach, students will simply find other outlets to purchase less-healthy food within the school. Even more importantly, as many participants in this study attested to, the food environment outside of school is more problematic than the one inside. Policies that limit what can be sold as part of a reimbursable meal may lure students away from those meals altogether if local food outlets and food from home does not change accordingly. In a recent USDA study of school lunch participation, Ralston et al. (2008) found that just over 60 percent of students eat lunch purchased at school; the other 40 percent bring food from home, purchase food a la carte or off campus, or they skip lunch altogether. Given the options in a la carte lines and fast-food restaurants, it is likely that students purchasing food elsewhere are often eating food that is unhealthier than school lunch.

Cooky (2009) notes that structures are imbued with meaning in part by the agency of the participants within those structures. For this reason, and as this study

demonstrates, child nutrition policy alone is not enough to transform the school food environment. Changing school lunch without changing the larger food environment within which it is embedded is only part of the solution, and it is the easiest and least-controversial part. One of the most important findings of the present research has been that increasing access to and affordability of school nutrition programs and improving their nutritional content does not change the fact that substantial structural constraints remain outside of school. For school lunch reforms to have the desired effect, they will need to be matched by efforts to improve the nutritional content and quality of the food choices students have outside of school. For example, a Philadelphia Food Trust has asked convenience stores located near schools to stock more fruits, vegetables and bottled water. The principal of an elementary school has also worked with parents and community members to ask convenience stores located near the school not to sell junk food to students before the school day begins, threatening to boycott the stores if they don't comply (Moss 2011). Off-campus efforts such as these are likely to be just as important, if not more so, than those taking place on-campus.

### ***Directions for future research***

In addition to questions that the present research raises for current policy changes, it also points to important directions for future research. One of the most important is how the structure of food in schools reproduces social inequality. Although it was not a major theme in this study, data I collected begin to suggest that the current structure of food in schools creates a two-tiered system whereby students

with limited economic resources are perceived to be forced to eat what is considered inferior food while those who have the means to do so can eat healthier foods and reap the health, educational and other benefits of doing so. Particularly considering that school food programs were started with the intention to reduce this kind of inequality, it is important to understand the ways in which these programs may in fact be exacerbating it. Although this question was not a focus of this research, it is an important one to ask—and one that participants in this study, particularly students, raised on their own in interviews.

Another important focus for future research is about the impact of universal free lunch on participation rates and program quality. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 allows high-poverty school districts to pilot universal meal service, meaning that all students, regardless of their family's income level, will automatically receive free meals at school. Advocates believe universal meals are important because many students who would benefit from Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL) certification currently do not receive it for a number of reasons. First, the stigma attached to the program keeps families from enrolling, or it keeps students who are enrolled from participating. Second, many students who do not qualify for FRPL still come from food-insecure families. To receive free lunch, the maximum income for a family of four is currently \$28,655 while the maximum for reduced lunch is \$40,792. Especially in areas with a high cost of living, these definitions of low-income are problematically low. Other obstacles, such as confusing paperwork for families and errors in the processing of that paperwork, reduce the number of students who receive the FRPL benefit for which they qualify. Universal free lunch, it has been suggested,

would increase participation by making everybody automatically qualify and thereby remove distinctions between and confusion around students who have need and those who do not (Poppendeick 2010).

Research about the efficacy and outcomes of the pilot programs that the new legislation calls for will be important for the future of school lunch as a social welfare program which, as the present research suggests, could be an important part of alleviating the role conflict that exists for food service directors. Reducing the burden on directors to generate the revenues necessary to keep their programs operating could allow them to dedicate their resources to improving the quality of the food they serve for free. The considerable time and resources that directors currently pour into processing applications, as discussed by directors for this research and in Poppendeick's (2010) work, could instead be channeled into making these lunch free and higher quality.

A final direction for research from this study is three-fold and draws from what I have argued throughout this dissertation about food service directors, food service staff, and students. Because this study examines the meaning of school food reform in four high schools, it is not clear how generalizable the findings of this research are to other settings. An important direction for future research would be to investigate how the meanings, relationships, and patterns identified in this study are applicable to other school districts around the country. For example, considering the recent director turnover in each of the three districts studied in this project, an interesting area for future research would be to examine if this is a broader trend—if directors are feeling squeezed out of or otherwise experience discontent in their positions by the

incompatible expectations attached to their roles. In terms of food service staff, or lunch ladies, how do their technical and emotion roles play out day-to-day and what does this mean for reform in other locations? Finally, how are students responding to change in schools where lunch remains an isolated part of the school day versus students for whom lunch is seized upon as a unique and participatory learning opportunity?

This dissertation provides an early set of answers to these questions, but school food reform is relatively new and it has a long way to go. The conclusions of this study suggest that for school food reform to be meaningful in the future, it is necessary to understand what reform means to the people closest to the center of it and what is constraining and enabling them in their various roles. This understanding is essential for informing policies that reduce the “shock” absorbed by actors caught in translation between macro-level structures and micro-level, on-the-ground realities.

## APPENDIX A

### CONSENT FORMS

#### **Persistence and Change in the School Food Environment Participant Consent Form**

You are invited to take part in a study of food in schools. We are asking you to take part because of your involvement with schools in Tompkins County. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

**What the study is about:** The purpose of this study is to learn how individuals view the food environment in their local schools and how they perceive attempts to maintain or change the current system.

**What we will ask you to do:** If you agree to be in this study, we will conduct an interview with you that will include questions about food choices students make in schools, alternatives students have (if any), and obstacles schools face in providing alternatives. The interview will take between 30 and 60 minutes to complete. With your permission, we would also like to tape-record the interview.

**Risks and benefits:** Overall, this study has no risks beyond those experienced in everyday life, and there are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study.

**Compensation:** You will receive no compensation for participating in this study.

**Taking part is voluntary:** Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may skip any questions that you do not want to respond to. If you decide not to take part or to skip some of the questions, it will not affect your current or future relationship with the Ithaca schools or Cornell University. If you decide to take part, you can withdraw at any time.

**Your answers will be confidential.** The records of this study will be kept private. In any scientific report we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a password-protected computer file; only the researchers will have access to the records. If we record the interview, we will erase the recording at the completion of this project, which we anticipate will be about May 2010.

**If you have questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Andrea Woodward. Please ask any questions you have at any time. If you have questions later, you may contact Andrea at 607-229-3919 or [alr63@cornell.edu](mailto:alr63@cornell.edu). If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 607-255-5138 or access their website at

<http://www.irb.cornell.edu>. You may also report your concerns or complaints anonymously through [www.ethicspoint.com](http://www.ethicspoint.com) or by calling toll free at 1-866-293-3077. Ethicspoint is an independent organization that serves as a liaison between the University and the person bringing the complaint so that anonymity can be ensured.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

**Statement of Consent:** I have read the above information, and have received answers to any stio jns I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview recorded.

Your Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least three years beyond the end of the study and was approved by the IRB on March 22, 2010.*

## **Persistence and Change in the School Food Environment**

### **Parental Consent Form**

Your child is invited to be in a research study about food choices at the school he or she attends. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to allow your child to take part in this study.

**The study:** This study is about students' food options and decisions at school. If you allow your child to take part, s/he will be asked interview questions about food choices s/he has and makes at school. The interview will take place individually or with a class of students and last 30 to 45 minutes. With your permission, we would like to tape-record the interview.

**Risks and benefits:** I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. There are no benefits to you or your child for taking part in the study.

**Compensation:** Participants in this study will be entered into a drawing to win one of five \$10 Regal Cinema gift cards per class. The odds of winning will depend on the number of students participating, but will likely be approximately 1 in 3.

**Confidentiality:** The information from this interview will be private and it will not be possible to figure out which responses came from your child. Records will be kept securely for one (1) year, and then destroyed.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your child's participation in this study is completely voluntary. Your child may skip any questions or withdraw from participation at any time. Your decision will not affect your current or future relationship with Cornell University or with your child's school.

The researcher for this study is Andrea Woodward. You may reach her at 229-3919 or [alr63@cornell.edu](mailto:alr63@cornell.edu). Feel free to ask any questions you have at any time. If you have any questions or concerns about your child's rights as a research participant, you may contact the Cornell Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 607-255-5138 or visit their website at [www.irb.cornell.edu](http://www.irb.cornell.edu). You may also report your concerns or complaints anonymously through [www.ethicspoint.com](http://www.ethicspoint.com) or by calling toll free at 1-866-293-3077. Ethicspoint is an independent organization that serves as a liaison between the University and the person bringing the complaint so that anonymity can be ensured.

We will give you copy of this form for your records.

Please enter your child's name and sign below if you consent to his or her participation.



Your child's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Your signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

In addition to agreeing to allow my child to participate, I consent to the interview being audio recorded.

Your signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Persistence and Change in the School Food Environment**

### **Child Assent Form**

You are invited to be in a research study about food choices in your school. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate.

**The study:** This study is about students' food options and decisions at school. If you agree to participate, you will be asked interview questions about food choices you have and decisions you make at school. The interview will take place either individually or with a class of students and will last 20 to 45 minutes. With your permission, we would like to tape-record the interview.

**Risks and benefits:** I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. There are no benefits to you for taking part in the study.

**Compensation:** Participants in this study will be entered into a drawing to win one of five \$10 Regal Cinema gift cards per class. The odds of winning will depend on the number of students participating, but will likely be approximately 1 in 3.

**Confidentiality:** The information from this interview will be private and it will not be possible to figure out which responses came from you. Records of interviews will be kept securely for one (1) year after this study ends, and then destroyed.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may skip any questions or withdraw from participation at any time. Your decision will not affect your current or future relationship with Cornell University or with your school.

The researcher for this study is Andrea Woodward. You may reach her at 229-3919 or [alr63@cornell.edu](mailto:alr63@cornell.edu). Feel free to ask any questions you have now or at any point in the future. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Cornell Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 607-255-5138 or visit their website at [www.irb.cornell.edu](http://www.irb.cornell.edu). You may also report your concerns or complaints anonymously through [www.ethicspoint.com](http://www.ethicspoint.com) or by calling toll free at 1-866-293-3077. Ethicspoint is an independent organization that serves as a liaison between the University and the person bringing the complaint so that anonymity can be ensured. We will give you copy of this form for your records.

Please enter your name and sign below if you consent to participate.

Your signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

In addition to agreeing to participate, I consent to having the interview recorded .

Your signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW GUIDES

#### IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE

- 1) What is your position in this school/ district?
- 2) How long have you been working in this school/district?
- 3) What are the biggest changes that have taken place in how food is provided to students since you began working here?
- 4) What food-related changes are currently being attempted in your school/district?
- 5) Which changes have been the most successful?
- 6) What has made them successful?
- 7) Which attempts at change have been the least successful?
- 8) What has kept them from being successful?
- 9) Do you have any say in how or what kind of food is provided in your school/district?
- 10) Would you like to have more of a say?
- 11) Are there any food-related changes you would like to see that aren't taking place?
- 12) What do you think are the biggest obstacles to those changes taking place?
- 13) What do you appreciate most about how food is provided to students in your school/district?
- 14) What do you think about the meals provided by the school at breakfast and lunchtime?
- 15) What do you think about the kinds of food provided outside of the school lunch program (this includes any food available for purchase outside of the cafeteria or in a la carte lines)?
- 16) What else you would you like to say about food in your school?

#### **Additional questions for teachers:**

- Do you ever purchase food in the cafeteria?
- Do you ever purchase food from a la carte lines, vending machines, or other places in school?
- Does food play a role in your classroom in any respect?
  - Do students eat or drink in your classroom?
  - Do you provide any food to students in class?
  - If so, how often and what do they eat or drink?
  - How much control do you have over whether or what kinds of food students eat in your classroom?
  - Would you like to have more control over this?

## STUDENT FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

- 1) What do you think of the current food choices at your school?
  - How have these choices changed since you started attending school?
  - What do you think of these changes?
  - How do you feel about efforts to make food in school healthier?
- 2) What are your favorite foods?
  - What do you eat at home?
  - What do you eat at restaurants/with friends?
  - Do you ever cook at home?
- 3) Where do you get the food you eat during the school day (e.g. bring from home, school breakfast/lunch line, a la carte, vending machines, off-campus locations)
  - When you bring food from home, what do you bring?
- 4) If you could have whatever you wanted to eat at school, what would you want to see served?
  - Why do you think it isn't that way?
  - Do you feel like students have any say in the kinds of foods that are available in your school?
  - Would you like to have more of a say?
- 5) What do you like most about the food in your school?
- 6) What do you like least about the food in your school?
  - Which breakfasts and lunches are the most and least popular?
- 7) What kinds of foods do you consider to be healthy?
- 8) How well do you know the people who work in the cafeteria?
- 9) Have you been part of fundraisers?
  - What have you sold?
  - How would you feel about making fundraisers healthier?
  - Would you buy from them?
  - Would your clubs make as much money?
- 10) Are students involved in composting efforts in the school?

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